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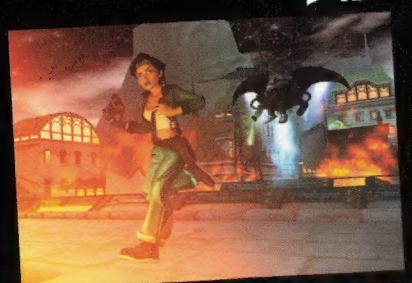

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See you online?

As one of the few in my immediate inner circle who has yet to board the online gaming bandwagon, I see the movement finally reaching the point where I might become swept away in its daunting embrace...which is damn scary. What's kept me at bay to this point is a lack of design integrity prevalent in the initial glut too crude to hold my interest—the fact that I'm not a big fan of frag-fests (I'd rather progress and adventure than shoot non-stop) and that I have no interest in realistic war simulations. Call me crazy, but photo-realistic killing just isn't for me. The fantastical got me into this pastime and I'm confident it will see me through. Phantasy Star Online certainly had it all going on—so much so that I only ever wanted to play it alone. As someone with the lingering tendency to soak up grandeur (which this game has in droves), traveling in a team, typing in messages and "keeping up" held no appeal. Too bad it's nearly impossible solo, which I could never understand. Why not build in single-player AI? I only waited six years for a sequel...

What I do like about online at this juncture is downloadable content. The ability to grab new levels of Brute Force, for instance, I find infinitely valuable. What a great way to keep users intrigued between sequels. Digital Anvil could conceivably distribute a downloadable cliffhanger leading players into the next game. (If there is one; BF is sorely underrated in my book.) What a fantastic benefit to game universes designed for long-term fan loyalty. I see this as one of the most exciting opportunities before us. Imagine the availability of something like this for a Voodoo Vince, Metroid or Castlevania... And what a great way to test the waters regarding new design ideas. Say, for instance, "Iga" cooked up a single PS2-powered 2D Castlevania level; the ensuing groundswell could take the game back into that direction...same for Metroid. The possibilities are endless.

Moving on, what's really turned my head of late, and the purpose of this editorial is the state of MMORPGs to come, just months from our grasp. Games like Final Fantasy XI, True Fantasy Live Online, Lineage II, Exarch and Guild Wars look dangerously captivating. I don't want to be the next guy on Dateline who jumped out the window when his hard drive fried, but I do have a tendency to take my fandom uncommonly seriously, and these games all look as deep artistically as they claim to be internally.

Whether or not the online experience will ever instill a level of esteem equal to what single player has remains to be seen. For now, I'm still a firm believer in the personal experience. Voyages like Beyond Good & Evil, skillfully produced action romps like Voodoo Vince, or the captivating one-player elegance of a Castlevania or Metroid will never, in my opinion, be bested. However, the online world beckons too, so what's a person to do? What's an industry to do? One thing I believe whole-heartedly is that we will always need both.

As always, I'm curious what you think. How many of you are already plugged into the online community and how many remain on the fence? Anything in particular you're looking for, still missing from the online experience? In the months ahead, as **play** continues to evolve, I see a potential for the online section to swell considerably, provided it's what the people want. And since you're our people, I put it to the floor.

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

Editorial

Editor In Chief	**Dave Halverson**
Editorial Director	**Brady Fiechter**
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Editorial Assistant	**Christina Alexander**
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Contributing Writer	**David Chapman**

Design

Art Director	**Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director	**Nelson Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher	**Michael Eisenberg**
Contact	**Michael Eisenberg** sales@playmagazine.com Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102 Fax 818.707.7212
Account Executive	**Kimberly Ratican** kratican@playmagazine.com
Newsstand Manager	**Howard White** hwhite9611@aol.com 508.984.5085

Corporate

Director Of Operations	**Julie Halverson** jhalverson@playmagazine.com 818.707.7786 ext.104
Administrative Assistant	**Christina Alexander** calexander@playmagazine.com

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e-mail: playquest@mcmillencomm.com

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TEEN T Mild Violence
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Microsoft game Studios

You and Vince, the third best voodoo doll in Madam Charmaine's shop, are charged with rescuing his maker from the evil Kosmo the Inscrutable. To get by pit frogs, imps, killadillos and more on the exotic streets of New Orleans, Vince must use his best weapon, himself. See Vince jump into a blender, stick himself with a pitchfork, step into a beartrap and over 25 ways in which Vince can hurt himself, which means he's really helping himself. So don't feel bad for Vince. It's what he does best.

Voodoo Vince — XBOX

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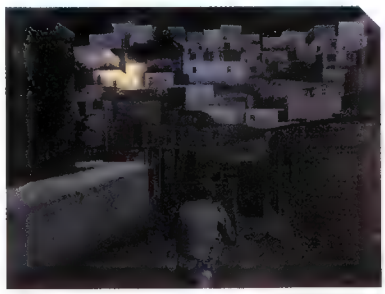
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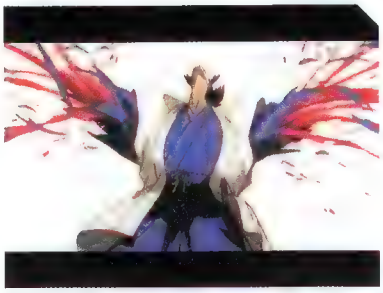
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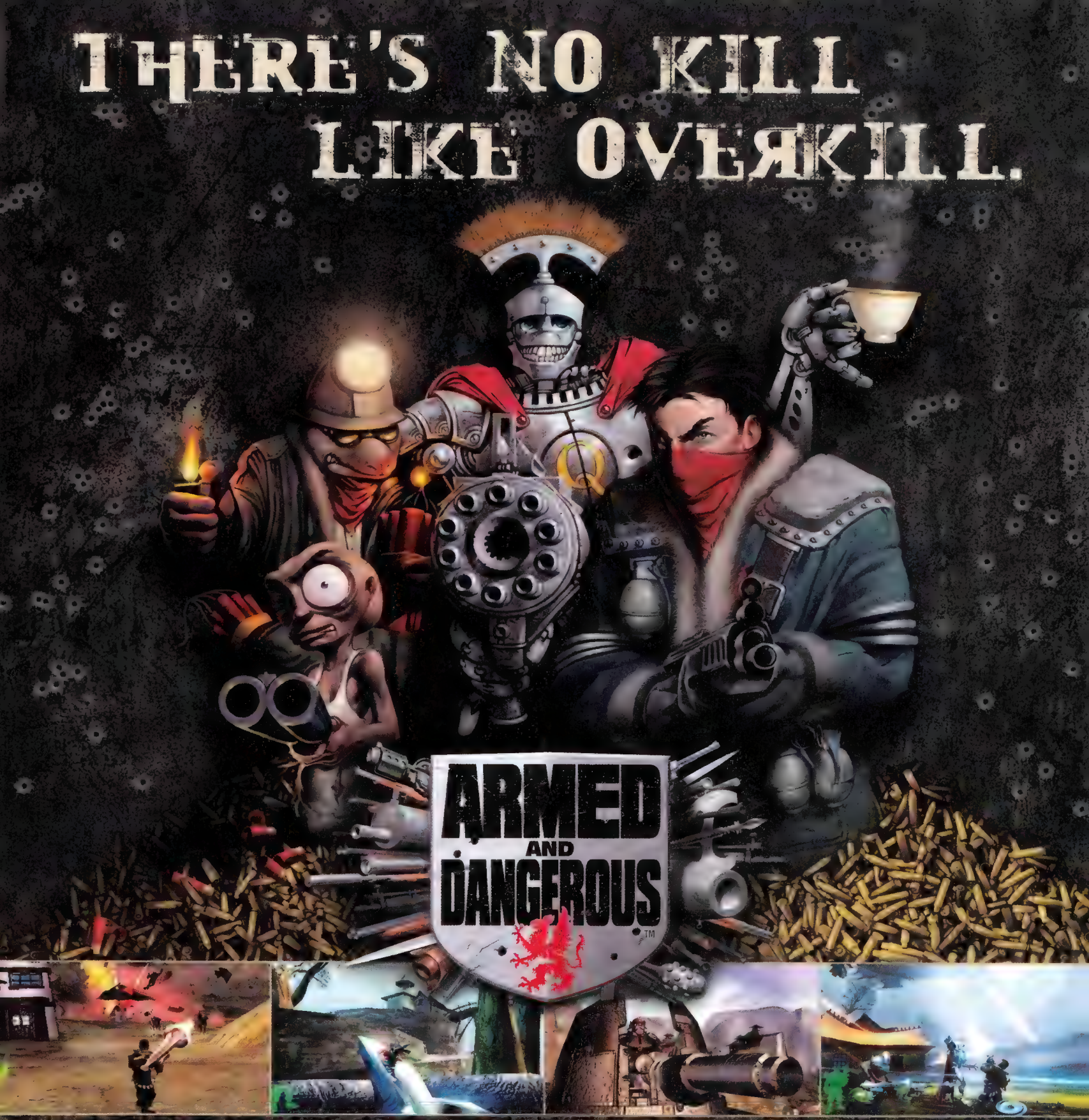

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LUCAS Arts

playback

letters@playmagazine.com

Letter of the Month:

Below is the text of an email I just received that claims to be from myself in the future! I am a physicist and find this extremely unlikely. Even the possibility of such a feat is extremely controversial among scientists and there is certainly no technology contemplated that I know of that would allow it. Still, what he says about video games in 2016 is interesting so I thought I'd pass it along.

"Hello, Henry. I know you will find this hard to believe but I'm you. I'm sending you this via a quantum time tunneling device on May 6, 2016. I have to be careful because the tea-cups (that's what they call the Time Continuum Protection police) frown on using the Internet this way—like anybody from 2003 is going to believe this anyway.

"I thought you'd be interested in what's happened to the video game industry. For one thing, the term 'video game' is no longer used and there are no consoles in stores anymore. But let me start from the beginning. It's an interesting story. In 2004, the video game industry was getting scared. They realized the future of consoles was downloading games from the Internet into a home game machine. The problem was that music and movie piracy at the time was rampant and they saw their bottom line disappearing. They decided to have a meeting. Everyone was there: game manufacturers, software houses, technologists, universities, the FCC, the FTC, everyone. It all seemed hopeless until someone made a bold suggestion. He pointed out that with recent advances in nanotech memory devices and quantum computing, computers were going to get a lot faster and cheaper over the next ten years. Also, quantum computing would enable absolute piracy protection. This was not news but what he said next stunned everyone.

"What he proposed was no less than a new form of media. He called it an Extended Media Bitstream. At first they didn't know what he was talking about, but once they got their head around it they started to get very excited. All visual media such as movies and television are recreations, in some form, of the light that would have reached your eyes if you'd actually been there. However, more and more, entertainment was being driven by computer-generated images both in movies and in video games. In hindsight, what was proposed was simply the natural next step in this process. If you were to go on to a 'movie' set today (in 2016) you'd be puzzled by what you saw. First, you'd see technicians walking around pointing a strange-looking instrument they call an EMB camera at everything. After a few minutes they'd mount the same instruments on rigid tripods. Then actors would come in to play their scene.

"The EMB camera is an extremely sophisticated computer that converts images to mathematical models that are stored internally. First the EMB camera learns the details of the scene. Previously stored are detailed math models of the actors. As the actors play their scene, the camera's computers use all of this information to create detailed motion models of the characters. This information, plus sound, is processed to create an EM bitstream. Today, television is practically extinct as you know it. Instead, you would buy an Extended Media Bitstream Player. The EMBP can take an EM bitstream and convert it to a photorealistic high definition image that looks like it was taken with an old-fashioned hi-def camera. The difference, of course, is that you are not limited to one angle or even one vantage point. Production costs are reduced and the special effects possibilities are endless, including even synthetic actors. (Real actors now commonly copyright their EMB math models.) What this means to video games is obvious. A video game is now simply a purely synthetic EM bitstream controlled with what is called an EMB story memory. The EM bitstream format includes story information to allow content providers to produce event-driven EM bitstreams. This explains why there are no console makers or even 'video games' anymore. Video games as we used to know them have been merged into the standard media technology of 2016."

Henry

E-mail him back and ask him how Halo 2 was.

> "Hello, Henry. I know you will find this hard to believe but I'm you. I'm sending you this via a quantum time tunneling device on May 6, 2016. "

Voodoo Child

I just wanted to write to thank you for the cover story you did on Voodoo Vince a few months back. You perked my interest with this title and now that I have it, I've been loving it these past few days. There is something about this game that just "feels" right to me. Some challenges can be tough, yet I have never found myself wanting to quit. This is always the mark of a great game. With that, please continue on with the great coverage of games that might pass under the radar of other major web sites and magazines.

Matt B.

The little guy is contagious, is he not? Pray for a sequel. Between us, Microsoft needs a nudge.

Hard Drivin'

Reading your article regarding the packaging, marketing and current retailing practices of the video gaming market made the proverbial light bulb appear above my head as the concept of digital delivery pushed away the thoughts of sleep, food and sex that usually form the lions' share of my waking thoughts. Right now the Xbox and PS2 have hard drives, and I suspect Nintendo's next machine will likely have one too. Why not skip the box all together and just make those old classics downloadable directly to the system? Older games could then still create revenue streams to allow for the funding of innovative new product, and retailers could rest easy knowing that newer product would only be available through them. Once their shelf life has passed, the titles could be made available digitally, thereby continuing the cycle. I think it would be a winner: gamers could easily play the classics, developers could expand their efforts creating original gaming experiences, and the retailing interests could enjoy a new, potentially huge and currently untapped revenue stream while extending the life cycle and profitability of their products. Please tell the folks involved that I have a paypal account, and I'm ready to go when they are!

Dave S.

Will do. Once they get the piracy aspects figured out, this is likely... It's also the model for the Phantom console. Should be interesting...

Fighting for 2D fighting

I am a big supporter of 2D fighting games. I have been in love with Street Fighter and the rest since the beginning. While the community has decreased dramatically since the old days, I still believe that the remaining community has become a hardcore niche market. Capcom vs. SNK 2 on Xbox live was such a great experience. And as such I would like to see more support from Capcom putting more fighting games online. It is sad that Marvel vs. Capcom 2 got its live play X'ed, But I think we can move on from it if Capcom could do us a little favor.

Street Fighter 3: Third Strike is not only one of the best fighting games ever made, but it got lackluster support because it came out at the wrong time. Many in the community agree that an Xbox Live enabled version of Third Strike would be the next great thing that Capcom can do for its dedicated fan base, problem is Capcom USA is difficult to work with. E-mail and letters often seem ignored or brushed off.

My question to you is: how does one

It would seem that Street Fighter still has a devout following. Good on ya!

go about influencing a company to comply with the needs of a dedicated user base? We have seen so much disappointment in the past five years that we all feel alienated. Capcom made lots of money by supporting the community back in the Street Fighter 2 days. They can invigorate the scene if they give players to option to play something other than a casual friend or an obnoxious CPU.

Lastly, I have not seen a 2D fighter on the cover of a magazine in so long. By the way, what ever happened to Nick Rox? I always wanted to see if he was all talk when it came to his SF skills.

[Unsigned]

Four words...Hyper Street Fighter II. It's not online, but it should rekindle at least some of the old magic, and from there, who knows? Believe me, Capcom is listening. You'd be surprised how fan-loyal they are. They may not reply, but they hear you. Nick Rox indeed had the mad skills. Now he lives somewhere inside of Final Fantasy XI...

What up, play?

I would just like to thank you for writing such a great review for P.N.03. This is truly a great action title and I am hopelessly addicted to it. Everything about the game, from its simplistic gameplay, to its chintsy instruction manual feels like a NES game. Have you seen what the rest of the press is saying. They all seem to have blinders on. It's as if they look at GTA Vice City as the pinnacle of gaming and no other title is permitted to stray from that formula. That's like saying Citizen Kane is a bad film because The Matrix has superior stunts. They also cite the short play time as a flaw. Why does every game need to be an eighty hour epic? I have beaten P.N.03 so many times that I have clearly gotten my money's worth. One member of the press even complained that he could not differentiate between the R and Z buttons, and preceded to blame P.N.03 for his inadequate playing skills. Can you believe these people are your competition? I don't always agree with your reviews, but they are always an interesting and unbiased read. Thank you for being the best magazine on the rack.
--Your fan since Gamefan,

J.P.

P.S. Tell Ayami Kojima to stop drawing Belmonts like girls. That look is fine for Alucard but Belmonts are supposed to look tough.

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"More moves right off the bat, more areas to check out - it's an action gamer's dream, really."

-Official Xbox Magazine, October 2003

Score: B+ "Not only does the game look better than its predecessor but it outperforms it in nearly every way."

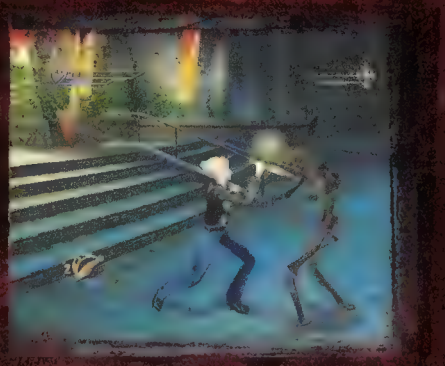
-Play Magazine, October 2003

Score: 8/10 "...caters to a larger audience, while at the same time doing more for hardcore Buffy fans."

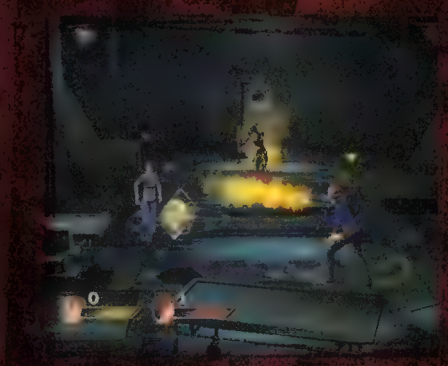
-Game Informer Magazine, October 2003

Battle as Buffy & 5 other favorite characters.

Multiplayer chaos - with support for up to 4 players on the same screen.



Story based on a lost episode of the television series.



Tokyo Game Show 2003

The legendary Tokyo Game Show has given up some of its prestige to the Electronic Entertainment Expo in recent years, but this year's show, held September 26 - 28, still offered much to shout about. Vast and diverse in scope, the following highlights demonstrate why Japanese game makers have ensnared so many a heart and soul.

Square Enix

Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children

The long-sought-after follow-up to Final Fantasy VII has finally been announced, and while it's not the sequel we were expecting, it sounds quite cool nonetheless. *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* is not actually a game, but rather a one-hour DVD movie set for release in Japan in summer 2004. Set two years after the apparent cataclysmic events at the finale of FFVII, details of *Advent Children* are scant but, as the images indicate, will feature the return of Cloud and Sephiroth. This could be the Final Fantasy movie that everyone was hoping *The Spirits Within* would be. No word on a U.S. release, but Square Enix's offices will probably be stormed and destroyed if they aren't considering it.

Because you demanded it: Cloud and Sephiroth return in the FFVII sequel DVD movie, entitled *Advent Children*.

Square Enix (cont.)

A Kingdom Hearts sequel has been entirely expected for some time now, but fans got a double-dose of good news to kick off the TGS. Square Enix and Disney Interactive announced development on not one, but two new Kingdom Hearts titles: Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories for the Game Boy Advance (A) and Kingdom Hearts II for the PlayStation 2 (B). KHII is a direct sequel, tying into the dark mystique presented at the end of the original game. Mickey Mouse seems to be a main character this time, and Sora, Riku and Kairi all return. Chain of Memories appears to be more of a sidestory/remake of the PS2 hit and will again feature Sora, Donald and Goofy as the main characters, adventuring through Disney worlds. Both games are scheduled for a U.S. release, and while there was no date given for Kingdom Hearts II, Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories should be on shelves sometime next year. Additionally, word from the GC2003 trade show in Germany is that Disney has decided to move forward with plans to create an animated series based on the Kingdom Hearts franchise, though no particulars are yet available.

Square Enix also had a number of other projects at TGS that were simply overflowing with production values. Action-RPGs have never looked so amazing: both the online (or offline) Ambrosia Odyssey, featuring randomly generated dungeons and cities, and the anime-styled Fullmetal Alchemist (C) look simply breathtaking. Meanwhile, Front Mission 4 (D) and Front Mission Online are set to take the mech-based strategy series to new heights on PlayStation 2, while Front Mission 1st will remake the series' Super Famicom debut on the PSOne. A deluxe limited edition set—containing Front Mission 1st, Front Mission 2 and Front Mission 3—will also be available.

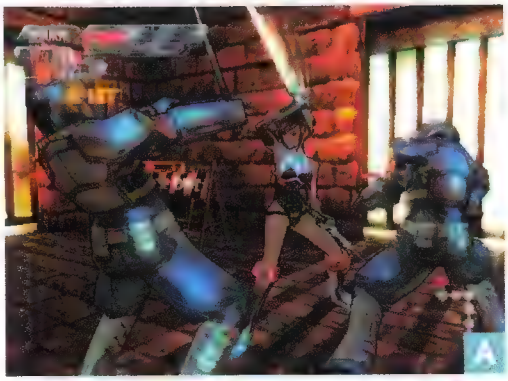
Fullmetal Alchemist, Square Enix's latest action-RPG, is simply oozing with style.

Tokyo Game Show 2003

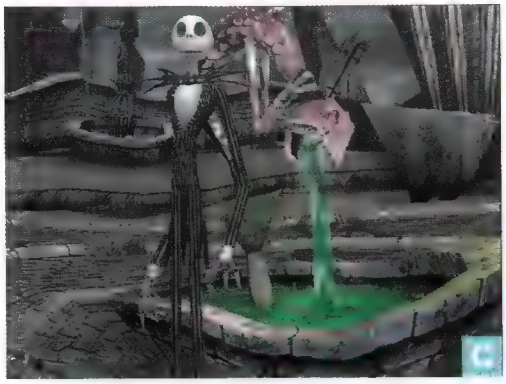
Highlights continued >

Capcom

Capcom's showing at TGS was to be expected: a lot of substance, a lot of major franchises, a lot of good gameplay. On the original game front, Capcom dominated the PlayStation 2 with the wickedly beautiful action game Crimson Tears (A), cartoony ninja madness in Jiraiya: The Magical Ninjya (B), and a visual feast in an adventure based on Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas (C). New footage was also shown on the continuously impressive Biohazard (Resident Evil) 4 for GameCube and Onimusha: Blade Warriors; Street Fighter is back on PlayStation 2 with Hyper Street Fighter II: The Anniversary Edition (D), an amalgam of SF2's five arcade versions; and Rockman (Mega Man) is returning in Rockman.EXE 4 (both Red Sun and Blue Moon versions) on GBA and Rockman X Command Mission (E), a cool-looking RPG for GC and PS2.


A

B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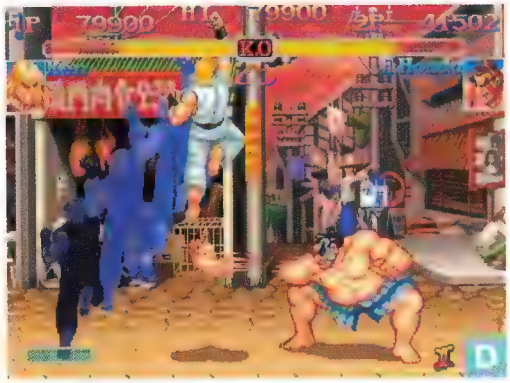

D

E

Konami

Genso Suikoden IV

Konami's grandiose, time-devouring RPG series is returning for another PlayStation 2 epic in the form of Genso Suikoden IV. Set 150 years prior to the first Suikoden, this prequel tells the tale of a young man, one who is in possession of the Punishment Rune, and his entwinement with the 108 Stars of Destiny. The graphics, the most notable flaw of Suikoden III, have been heavily upgraded, and travel on the open seas plays a part in the new quest—ship-to-ship combat will even be incorporated into gameplay. Konami also described the game as having a "new ground breaking" combat engine. Furthermore, Konami have already confirmed the game for a U.S. release (simply called Suikoden IV, of course), set for release in fall 2004. Say…Ted, the bearer of the Soul Eater Rune from first Suikoden game, should be alive and well 150 years prior to Suikoden I…

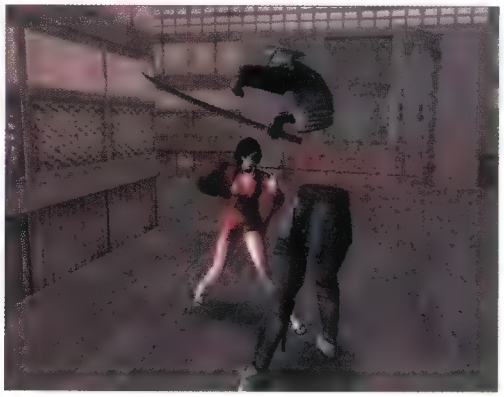
Hudson

Hudson has revealed their answer to Super Smash Brothers, headed to both GameCube and PS2. It's called Dream Mix TV World Fighters, and it features not only Hudson characters like Bomberman, Hugo (from Bloody Roar) and Master Higgins (from Adventure Island), but also Konami heroes like Simon Belmont and Twinbee, and even Takara characters like Optimus Prime. Several of the characters have yet to be revealed. Hudson also demonstrated their latest remakes—Bonk and Adventure Island—both coming to GameCube in December.

VU Games

Red Ninja: End of Honor

A union between publisher Vivendi Universal and new Japanese developer Tranji is yielding Red Ninja: End of Honor for PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Set in 1500s feudal Japan, Red Ninja casts you in the role of female ninja Kurenai in a game that encompasses action, adventure and stealth. Numerous weapons, including the wire weapon Tetsugen (Kurenai's favorite), blowguns, smoke bombs and explosives will be available, and Kurenai will be able to don disguises, seduce men with her looks and use ninjitsu powers. The game is scheduled for a fall 2004 release.



Growlanser regenerates

Hardcore RPG fans may recall that way back at E3 2002, Working Designs announced they would be bringing the strategy-RPGs Growlanser II: The Sense of Justice and Growlanser III: The Dual Darkness to PlayStation 2. More than a year later, Working Designs has announced that both games will be released together in a double-disc set entitled Growlanser Generations. Citing difficulty with Sony's approval process as the reason for the games' delay and subsequent transformation into a single release, Working Designs has tentatively scheduled the game for release in first quarter 2004. WD promises that Growlanser Generations will offer more than 80 hours of gameplay (including 13 hours of dialogue), branching paths, multiple endings, transferable data and numerous unlockables, including WD's trademark outtakes.

"Silent" Treatment

Konami and IDW expand the Silent Hill universe
Continuing the current trend of translating popular video game franchises into comic book series, Konami of America has recently announced that it has entered into a deal with IDW Publishing to develop a comic book based on the popular Silent Hill line of video games. The series, scheduled to hit store shelves in February 2004, will be written by author Scott Ciencin ("Dinoverse"), with art by Ben Templesmith ("30 Days of Night") and newcomer Aadi Salman. We recently had the opportunity to discuss the project with the book's editor, Kris Oprisko.

play: How did the relationship between IDW and Konami come to pass?
Kris Oprisko: Everyone at IDW are long-time fans of Konami and their games. When Ted [Adams, publisher at IDW] worked for Todd McFarlane, he met some of the people from Konami when McFarlane did the Metal Gear Solid figures.

Will the Silent Hill comic be an adaptation of one of the video games, or will it be an original story?
The story will be set in the world of Silent Hill, but will not simply be a retelling of a story from one of the games. The town itself acts as such a great frame for dramatic storytelling, as it draws out people's inner demons and gives them a frighteningly real form, that we really wanted to exploit all the horrific possibilities it presented. So the stories will be original, but Silent Hill fans will be seeing lots of familiar monsters, and some terrifying new ones as well.

How much input does Konami have with the Silent Hill comic?
Konami and the producers of the Silent Hill games have absolute control over our comics. They approve everything we do and we wouldn't want it any other way.

As a result of this partnership, can we expect to see more comics based on various other Konami franchises, such as Castlevania, Metal Gear and Contra?
We sure hope so. We'd love to do comics based on all of those games.

PS2 and Square drive a hard bargain

Sony has announced a March release date for the long awaited (and long overdue) hard drive addition for the PS2. The 40GB hard drive will retail for $99 US, and is scheduled to come pre-loaded with Final Fantasy XI. The drive will also include a customized media software package, which will allow users to play MP3s and even rip CDs to a jukebox. Also included will be a photo manager, allowing users to store, edit and view digital photos. This may end up being particularly useful for people who pick up Sony's EyeToy peripheral.

The addition of the hard drive will also allow gamers to take advantage of downloadable content, such as new levels and characters, similar to what is currently available to those gamers with Microsoft's Xbox Live service. Among the first games to utilize the downloadable content feature will be SOCOM II and Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain.

More Mega Man, man!

Mega Man Anniversary Collection
Currently celebrating his 15th year as a video game superstar, Mega Man has had quite a substantive showing recently, but the party isn't over yet. Capcom recently announced Mega Man Anniversary Collection for the PlayStation 2 and GameCube, coming in February 2004, composed of Mega Man 1 (NES) through Mega Man 8 (PlayStation), as well as the two scarcely seen Mega Man arcade games, Mega Man: The Power Battles and Mega Man 2: The Power Fighters, where Mega Man, Proto Man or Bass engage in a sequence of boss battles. The games will be enhanced with updated music, and bonus features come by way of anime footage, producer interviews, TV commercial spots and a series history.

In the cards
In addition to all his games, Mega Man continues to branch out into other forms of entertainment, including his very own series of trading cards. Scheduled for an early 2004 release from Artbox Entertainment, this 54-card set (45 basic and nine foil chase) boasts 100 percent classic Capcom artwork from the original Mega Man game series. The front of each card will feature characters from the games as well as package artwork from his various adventures, while the back will feature info on the character or entity. Suggested retail per pack is $1.99, and if the series does well, future series, featuring other incarnations, such as Mega Man X, are possibilities.

Over-Zelda-ous

In what could simultaneously be the greatest and most heinous promotional offer in memory, rumors strongly point to Nintendo releasing a free Legend of Zelda Collection for the Nintendo GameCube in late October, containing the original NES Legend of Zelda, Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, Ocarina of Time and Majora's Mask all on one disc. The catch, sources indicate, is that the disc will only be available with the purchase of a new GameCube. Since a retail version is not planned, current Cube owners will have to buy a new system if they want to experience Link's classic quests—a crafty, but not especially fan-friendly, strategy. Nintendo also has other confirmed promotional freebies in the works, although none with such grand appeal, for pre-purchasing selected games. Pre-orders of Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike will include a disc containing the classic Star Wars arcade game, and Mario Kart: Double Dash!! buyers will get a bonus disc with as-yet-undisclosed content.

THE SAGA CONTINUES

The wait is over. Now The King of Fighters, Episodes 6 and 7, are both here. The sequel, The King of Fighters 2000, plus the final chapter of The Tale of NESTS saga, The King of Fighters 2001, equals fierce 2D action-fighting on 2 DVDs! Duke it out like never before in this special 2-in-1 pack exclusively for the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system.

- Special new Strikers and characters
- 75 playable characters to choose from
- Original 3D polygon stages, upgraded modes and graphics for The King of Fighters 2001

TEEN T — Blood, Violence — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

PlayStation®2

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Fatal Frame movie off to a thrilling start

Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly may be a few months from completion, but already its terrifying ambience and reliance on the horrors of the unseen are causing a stir among the press and hollywood alike. With the thrill of the classic haunted-house effect, the game is perfectly suited for a transition to the bigscreen, and taking the reigns is Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks Studios. Already attached to the project is producer/writer John Rogers, but Tecmo has announced that Spielberg himself will be involved in its transition to film. A director and cast have yet to be put together, waiting for the finalized script to take shape. Rogers, who is currently working on *Catwoman* with Halle Berry and Sharon Stone, was especially drawn to Fatal Frame's Japanese setting. "I was attracted to the idea of doing a classic, old school haunted house picture," Rogers said. "By focusing, too, on cool Japanese cultural additions and different ghost "mythos" most North American audiences are unfamiliar with, we can do something unique. None of the rules about the supernatural, the characters, or our audience apply in the Fatal Frame world."

Hollywood bites

Majesco's hybrid is coming to a theatre near you

Director Dr. Uwe Boll and Brightlight Pictures (currently wrapping production on the film adaptation of Alone in the Dark, starring Christian Slater, Tara Reid and Stephen Dorff) will be bringing BloodRayne to the silver screen, to begin filming sometime in 2004 with a budget of 30 million; Shawn Williamson (*White Noise*) is set to produce. Agent BloodRayne was raised and trained by a secret agency to hunt down and eliminate supernatural threats the world over, using her keen acrobatics skills, aura sense, dilated perception and the ever-popular harpoon, to skewer, reel in and drain her victims. No word yet on who might play the lead role, but we're liking Famke Jansen (*X-Men*) and Monica Bellucci (*Matrix Reloaded, Brotherhood of the Wolf*).

Simon & Schuster sell the farm

It was a sad day for golf fans who love to beat the hell out of caddies as Simon & Schuster, publisher of Outlaw Golf, announced that it has started the process of selling off its video game division. The move came after it was decided that the game division was not a core business for the book publisher, and that the division would benefit more with support from a company more dedicated to software development. While Simon & Schuster did announce that they still had two games in development, the future of the Outlaw sports games remains in doubt.

Stan Lee gets into the game

Fanboys rejoice—comic book legend Stan "The Man" Lee has inked a deal with Activision to become a consultant for the popular game publisher, and to work with them on various upcoming promotions. With Activision's licensing deal with Marvel already signed through 2009, the company is scheduled to release games based on Marvel's Spider-Man, Fantastic Four and X-Men properties. Besides incorporating his trademark voice and likeness into the upcoming games, Lee will also lend his expertise on storylines and character development to ensure that the games remain faithful to the comic books on which they are based. Hopefully this will help to improve Activision's track record with their X-Men games, which have been sorely lacking recently. Additionally, the deal with Lee gives Activision first look at any original game concepts developed by him for the duration of the contract. Prior to signing with Activision, Lee had mentioned that he was currently working on an undisclosed video game property. One rumor going around is that he may be involved in the development of a video game based on his *Stripperella* animated series. The show, starring Pamela Anderson, focuses on the exploits of a stripper who moonlights as a secret agent superhero. We're game!

Start saving those quarters

Who says arcades are dead? OK, so they might be on life support, but that hasn't stopped some of the most respected names in coin-ops from continuing to crank out compelling titles. At the recent Amusement Machine Show in Tokyo, Sammy announced that they will be teaming up with SNK Playmore to produce the next King of Fighters game, scheduled for release in spring 2004. Breaking years of tradition, the game will utilize 3D graphics and will run on Sammy's Dreamcast-based Atomiswave hardware instead of the old Neo Geo. Equally enticing to fighting fans is the announcement of Sammy's violent union with Capcom: Sammy vs. Capcom—a battle that will see the fighters of Guilty Gear battling the warriors of the Capcom universe. Though Sammy vs. Capcom is still in early development, it will also run on the Atomiswave hardware, will most likely utilize the game system from Guilty Gear, and could feature characters from the Darkstalkers series, among others. In other arcade news, a four-player networked Guilty Gear game, called Guilty Gear Isuka, is in development, and SNK has revealed that Metal Slug 5 is already in the works.

Counter-Strike™ and Xbox *Live*.
A match made in "holy-*#!%-did-you-see-that" heaven.

MATURE 17+
M
Blood
Intense Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Microsoft game studios

VALVE

Counter-Strike,™ the world's #1 online action game*, is even better on Xbox *Live*.™ With graphically superior action, 7 exclusive maps, up to 16 player game play and a vast arsenal of weapons, this is the best Counter-Strike yet. You may want to practice offline before you enter the merciless online arena. Here, you can go it alone or you can assemble an elite team of gamers and talk strategy over the *Live* Communicator on how to defuse bombs, rescue hostages and take on terrorists from all over the world. The competition will be tough, so you'd better come prepared.

XBOX LIVE

COUNTER STRIKE

XBOX

it's good to play together

xbox.com/counterstrike

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Art: Nintendo's Kirby Air Ride

NOTE TO SELF:
WATER FAIRY MAKES LOUSY DEFENSE AGAINST GIANT PYRO DRAGON!
Culdcept... The magical card-based, land acquisition video game that has swept Japan and now has its sights set on the USA.
PlayStation 2
Culdcept
PlayStation®2
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Partial Nudity
NEC
www.NECGAMES.com

NINJA GAIDEN

Nearly 15 years since Ryu's initial journey on NES, the ninja who became a gaming legend—and helped build Tecmo—returns

words brady fiechter

system: xbox
developer: team ninja
publisher: tecmo
available: december

Almost 15 years ago—an eternity on the video-game timeline—one of the most heinously difficult, newly cinematic, intensely engaging action-platform series was born on the NES, gaining such a cult appreciation that it's not uncommon to hear veteran gamers cite it as one of the best games ever made. Conversations recalling the spirit of gaming past will no longer need to involve the mystery behind why the successful series was apparently laid to rest in the 8-bit era, because...well, now it's being brought back to life.

The daunting duty of resurrection has been placed in the wildly passionate, capable hands of Dead or Alive creator and Team Ninja director Tomonobu Itagaki, who has been toiling away through 20-hour shifts to craft an assaulting action title that stays true to the spirit of Ninja Gaiden. Itagaki seems to revel in keeping what he and his incredibly talented team are close to completing a tight secret, shedding just enough light on the game to continue to build on the already monstrous expectations. Given the impact of the disparate parts that have been revealed—only two nearly complete levels were allowed to be explored for this preview—listening to Itagaki speak of the many facets of the game that are important to him, knowing of his reputation and track record, you want to play this game now, fueled by his words of confidence: "Ninja Gaiden will be the best action title ever made."

This is an action game to the very core. There are a few basic, casually integrated puzzles here and there to allow you to catch your breath, and a backstory of lost love and bloodthirsty redemption—Itagaki wouldn't dare go into details—is woven in for more inclusion into Ryu's reality of conflict. But you'll play this game to cut down armies of monsters and humans, exploring the gorgeous settings one extremely cautious step at a time. The enemy swarms with unrelenting force, picking you apart the moment you let your guard down, working in packs with lightning quickness. They don't wait for you to always make the first move. If you get caught up in a close-range battle, minions will disperse in the perimeter to tag you with projectiles. While he's continuing to balance the game, Itagaki has no qualms with creating a devilishly challenging game; this is Ninja Gaiden, after all.

Ryu's more than up to the engrossing challenge, capable of unleashing devastating combos with killer efficiency. The control scheme is basic, employing a block, weak, fierce and secondary strike, which are all combined to create the acrobatic attacks needed to repel the evil hordes. As a beautifully nimble ninja, Ryu can scale walls to add to his elusive strategy and, of course, just look and feel dynamically alive.

concept art courtesy of Team Ninja

There are moments in the game when you simply want to step back and soak in the marvel of it all

"...you want to play this game now, fueled by his words of confidence: 'Ninja Gaiden will be the best action title ever made.'"

Cutting through a group of foes is not limited to simply pounding out prescripted combos and watching the same death scene by the same prosaic strategy to mental shutdown. Ninja Gaiden seems uncommonly freed of leaden restriction for a heavy action title, allowing you to use the entire room as a playground of destruction. Enemy position and your distinct pattern of movement play in to the style of your attack, causing even the most overused combo to offer varying results. Being creative is part of the fun: run across a wall, toss a handful of shuriken, slash down with a fierce strike, jump-flip back to the wall and redirect a combo into a pair of creatures now properly weakened, hopelessly caught in your line of sight. It feels so rewarding clearing out a room, that rush of adrenaline leaving you excited for more. But here it's more than skilled combat mechanics; the presentation of the assault adds so much to the way it all feels, further intensifying the stylish thrill of the kill.

More than just an entertaining dance with ninja-style bloodshed, the results of your superior actions are translated into a form of currency for adding to your arsenal of equipment. For long-range attacks, the shuriken and bow and arrow can be upgraded with explosive elements, and several types of blades can be acquired in addition to the katana and nunchuks. Every weapon holds a specific feel and ability, but you don't necessarily need a particular item to effectively dominate an area. The one upgrade I got to mess around with was the battle hammer, which was heavy and slow, yet incredibly powerful, as its sharp head skewered enemies, swinging them around as a wrecking ball.

While only one type was available, it looks like the use of magic will also play a key role in Ryu's survival. His ninjitsu powers gradually build as the body count rises, stored for those inevitable moments that require a special use of force. There's just so much cool technique to explore, and the intuitive, organic nature of the control never makes you feel like you have to mechanically plan out your attacks as much as react accordingly to the situation as it unfolds.

Exactly what it all adds up to is left to Itagaki and Team Ninja finally unleashing their carefully guarded secret in its entirety. So far, the game plays marvelously. The look is fantastically detailed and exactly what you would expect from an A-list team working wonders on Xbox. When you've sampled a few already impressive parts, watching Itagaki infectiously express his vision like a mad scientist, marking up charts, throwing around reams of concept art and level designs, you have little concern that the final creation will deserve to carry the Ninja Gaiden name.

There's nothing like the slash of a sword, but don't disregard the power of a good punch-kick combo.

Interview

Like the ninja himself, much of Ryu Haybusa's long-anticipated return to action gaming has stealthily hid in secrecy. Now, Ninja Gaiden mastermind Tomonobu Itagaki lifts the veil of darkness surrounding this potential powerhouse.

interview by brady fiechter and dave halverson

play: So when you're designing a game like this, do you have a very specific audience in mind, or are you reaching out to everyone? The hardcore are really looking forward to Ninja Gaiden, and some people really do want intense difficulty.
Tomonobu Itagaki: Using DOA as an example, there are many casual gamers who enjoy playing it as well as hardcore gamers. So that's the same approach I'm taking with Ninja Gaiden. Our games, of course, look good, so they appeal to many people, making them want to really play, simply because it looks good. You draw people in that way. Then, of course, for the hardcore gamers, I'm always implementing enough things in the game, more and more special features and elements to keep them excited, keep them intrigued.

The people who grew up with the NES, the people who are especially looking forward to this game, the ones going to wait in line to buy it, are the hardcore gamers. Knowing that the game has that focus, that's awesome to hear.

concept art courtesy of Team Ninja

[pulls out paper to draw a chart] Most ordinary games, they start with hardcore gamers, then continue to spread to the rest... My goal is to appeal to different desires. Some people want graphics, or a certain technology, or Xbox, specific gameplay or whatever it may be. You have to hit every need, every taste at once.

What is the deal with the Xbox live contingent? I noticed an option for Live on the title screen.
I plan to announce the Xbox live treatment at the event in France [XO3].

Or you could announce it now.
No, no [laughs.]

Who is that mysterious female character? Can we get a look at her? Is she in here?
No, she's not ready [laughs.]

It's been so many years since the original Ninja Gaiden. How closely are you paying attention to the NES game while designing this sequel? Are you looking back much to maintain similar gameplay and feel, or are you approaching this from an entirely different perspective?
Well, this is being approached as an entirely new project. But beginning with the ninja theme, naturally, there are many things that are the same. We're introducing the weapons from the old Ninja Gaiden. Now that we're closer to completing this project, we're finding even more respect for the original game, starting to implement even more of what was there.

The Xbox in America is doing very well, but not nearly as well in Japan. Is this game expected to move hardware in Japan?
I don't really think about whether it will move hardware or not. My main focus was to make it for the American market, basically. Of course, I have a few hundred thousand fans in Japan who will more than likely buy the game, and consequently, hardware sales may go up somewhat. But that's not my objective.

So the buzz in Japan is like it is here?
In Japan, they have similar lists as they do here, like the most anticipated Xbox title. The number one for many months has been DOA online, and number two is Ninja Gaiden. And number three is DOA Chronos...the mysterious Chronos [laughs]. And number four, Halo 2. But the top three are my games.

What kind of challenges are you facing transitioning into an entirely new genre, moving from the fighting and sport angle of DOA?
One thing I'm intrigued by, as I create enemies, we've got monsters and humans both. It's much easier to create monsters. When you create human enemies, you have to worry about a different AI issue, because as a player you expect a human enemy to think like you. Those are some of the biggest challenges I've been experiencing, but I'm really enjoying resolving those challenges. In this world of Ninja Gaiden, physically, human enemies are much weaker than monsters. The humans will always be weaker, but if you just leave it that simple, you'll start to look at them like, they're just stupid idiots. So we're working on making the human enemies more intelligent, not just weak and dumb. We're constantly focusing on such details. We are taking these issues very seriously.

They seem to really swarm. It seems like you have to be aware, really move around the room.
Exactly. As the director of the project, I'm focusing on the battle scenes, as you described—you're right on the money. I liken it to the old samurai-movie-style combat. The rest of them stand, everyone just watches, where there's no intelligence. A lot of people get caught in that trap—almost everyone. And, of course, depending on Ryu's physical condition, if you're weakened by an attack, then of course the enemy will charge in. The enemy strategy does evolve and change, more or less in real time.

How do weapons play in? Does the game become easier if you have the right weapon?
It's designed in a way that you may want to choose a certain weapon for a certain level, but I believe the Japanese sword, the Katana, is the main weapon and all the other ones are just there for added excitement and fun.

So if you master the sword, you can beat the game using it solely?
Some of the other weapons have features that are much stronger than the Katana, but there are drawbacks. It may be too heavy, slowing you down, or more awkward.

As an action game, are you making it expansive?
It's important that the experience lasts. We're looking for a much longer game than the typical action game, perhaps as long as fifty hours.

No matter what the game, if you're only buying one, you want it to last all month, something you maybe want to play twice, or three or four or five times.
In the long run, you'll be staying up all night to play this game, but staying up one night is not going to get you even close to the end [laughs].

And it looks like it's going to be challenging.
Just wait.

While I played Ninja Gaiden under the watchful eye of Itagaki, a few sections were refreshingly brutal, as the enemies assaulted my every step with aggressive attacks and lightning responses to my mistakes. He admitted that balancing the game is proving a tremendous challenge, finding the exact note he wants to hit, but in no way will the final outcome be a compromise on any level. Itagaki's passion to craft not only the finest action game on the market but a worthy successor to the Ninja Gaiden heritage breeds confidence that he will succeed. *play*

"We're introducing the weapons from the old Ninja Gaiden...we're finding even more respect for the original game, starting to implement even more of what was there."

Halo 2

One of the most eagerly awaited games drawn [illegible] attention at XO3 [illegible]

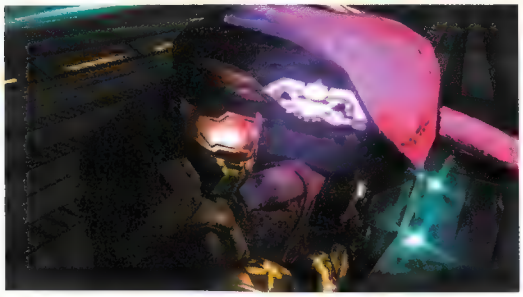
system: xbox
developer: bungie
publisher: microsoft
available: TBA 2004

People who don't normally like video games liked Halo. People who don't like first-person shooters liked Halo. People who normally like first-person shooters called it the best they'd ever played. Critics slopped it with praise in the end-of-year awards. It made people buy Xboxes, myself included: I needed another system in the bedroom just to play Halo before I went to bed.

Who knows what Bungie is dreaming up with this high-pressure sequel? E3 showcased a couple minutes of astounding live gameplay, managing to deviously stoke the anticipation that much more. Since then, most of the game's foundation has been laid down, leaving the final stretch of development to connect all the disparate pieces.

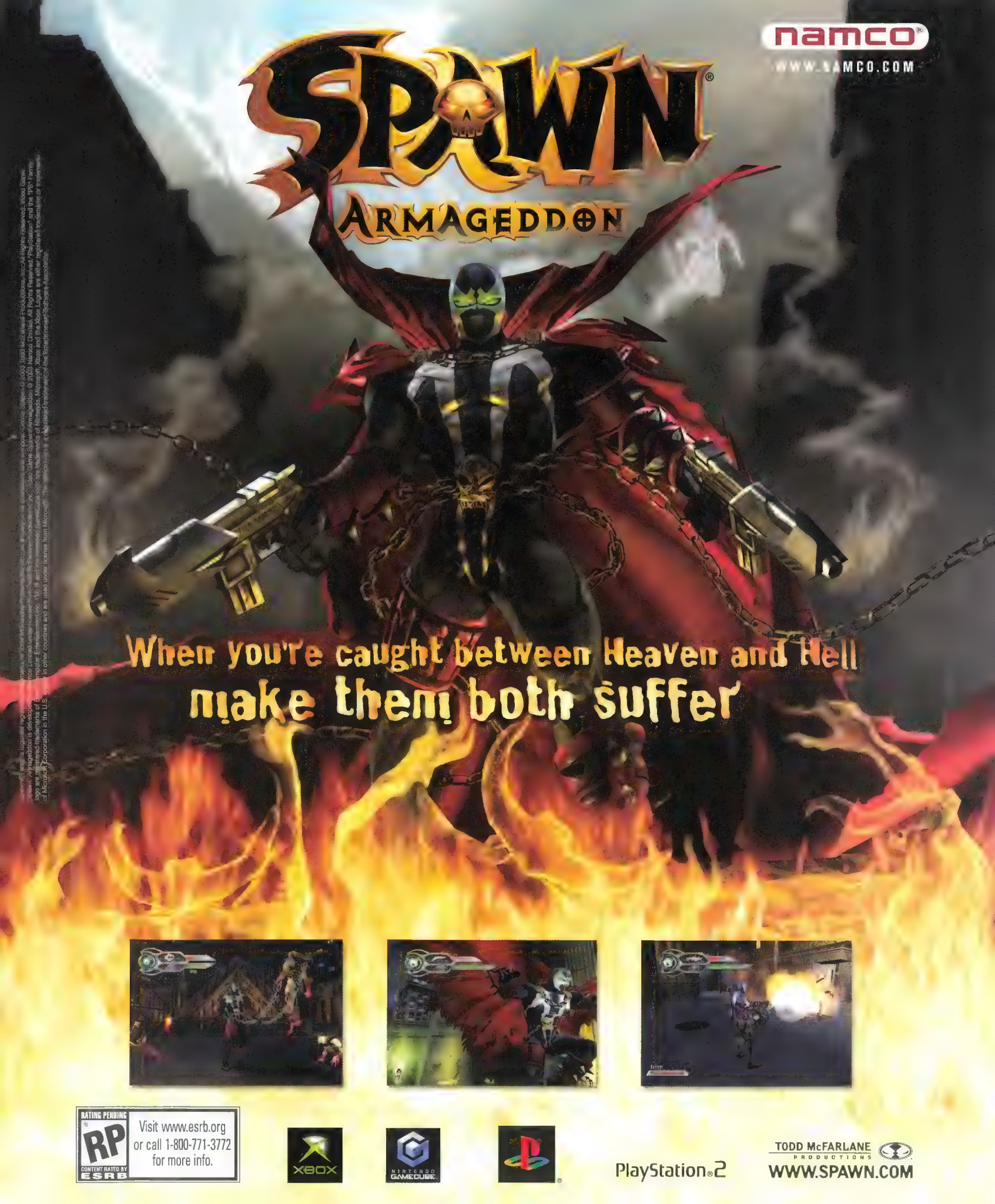
At the recently held XO3 event, established to showcase all things Xbox, a few members from the team touched on their continued progression with the game, making a point to emphasize the ambitions of the storytelling. "We just like good stories," said Bungie's Joseph Staten on video. "We certainly worry about that a lot more than you might think we have to in a game that's mostly just about action and about not thinking."

As incredible as Halo was, Bungie admits a good deal was left out that could have made the adventure that much more compelling. That, of course, is what sequels are for, and listening to the overflow of new ideas being dumped into the game serves as a convincing argument that Halo 2 will change yet again the way we look at a first-person shooter. The roar of the crowd as the teaser video rolled seemed to agree.



Halo 2 captures a similar tone as the original, but it just looks so much better.

"...a convincing argument that Halo 2 will change yet again the way we look at a first-person shooter."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Grabbed by the Ghoulies

Ghoulies...they grabbed me

words dave halverson

system: xbox
developer: rare
publisher: microsoft
available: october

I highly respect Rare, and if I can find any reason to tout a system exclusive ('cause they make the world go 'round), I don't hold back. That said, let it be known that I was less than thrilled going into this preview—a rare occurrence, since I usually start chewing my nails about 60 days out when a new Rare game comes to town. The last time this happened was with Blast Corps, the sole Rare game I never did warm up to. Ghoulies does not fall in that category, although I'm still less than blown away (so far), and Rare games, well, they answer to a higher power. Perhaps by game's end...

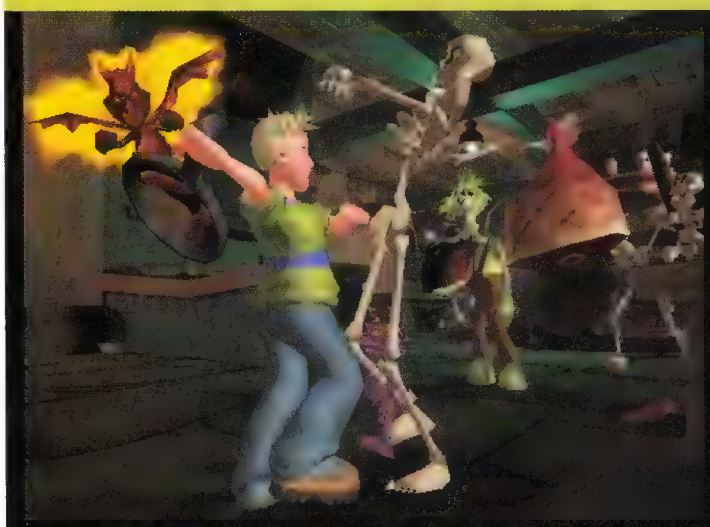
Ghoulies' somewhat unique premise (Ape Escape had a similar set-up, as does the upcoming Rise to Honor) is that for the most part it's a no-button game. Besides using the A button for picking up or using various items, you essentially attack in the direction you point the right stick as you traverse room after room (after room after room), annihilating spooks from the Gruntilda school of ghoul design. The game's many nuances lie in the secrets buried within each room—rooms that become games unto themselves as you assail the depths of Ghoulhaven Hall. Once the door slams shut, the fun begins. In the case you merely have to clear a room in order to escape, it's much easier said than done, and that's usually the least of your worries. The AI in Ghoulies is killer (pun intended), and Rare's breed of assorted imps, freaks and ghouls love to swarm. There's always a strategy for success, though: no matter how overwhelmed you feel, somewhere hidden in the room there's the key...you just have to find it. This results in do-overs, sometimes lots, sometimes less, depending on your skill level and intuition. Nearly everything is breakable, pick-ups are strategically placed, and if you're lucky, you'll get a weapon. The rest, as they say, is up to you.

The real nastiness begins when you hear the Grim Reaper's bell toll, your signal to clear the room before the counter hits zero or suffer his wrath—after he belts out some Bill and Ted air guitar on his sickle, that is; the guy has his priorities. Problem here is, he be fast and you be slow. You can escape, you just have to kill the remaining spooks on the go while avoiding his advances and then break for the door...like I said: do-overs. To say the rooms get manic would be an understatement, so if you're looking for depth and like the premise, you can stop reading now and scare up the 50 bucks. I've had easily 15-20 freaks closing in, yet while winging everything I could grab, still made it out alive. That's when it pays off. Sometimes you have to kill a certain type, sometimes avoid killing a certain type; there's a script for everything—too bad you don't have a copy.

Of course, it's also drop-dead gorgeous (like I had to point that out), especially if you like the Rare-style cartoon-spooky designs. Extra polish can be found in the game's storybook presentation, where you'll find every panel of each individual page 3D animated. It takes you away from the game a bit much at times, but it also frames the action and sets the tone, the characters grunting along with the text reminiscent of Rare's best. The action takes one more turn, via first-person hallway creeps, where you have to be at the ready for close encounters, ready to press a sequence of buttons to keep from getting scared to death—very cinematic, very cool.

Cooper, the lead character on the other hand, I have mixed feelings about, although he is starting to grow on me. His sister (the one that gets snatched in the Rocky Horror-like set-up) is actually much cooler, but, er, she's having some problems. The last time I saw her, Baron Von Ghoul had turned her into something very repulsive, which reminds me...time to go!

"...no matter how overwhelmed you feel, somewhere hidden in the room there's the key...you just have to find it."



If you can't take the heat (or a skeleton armed with a ham), stay out of the kitchen.

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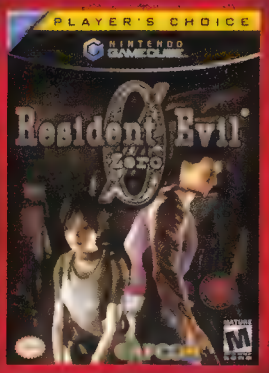

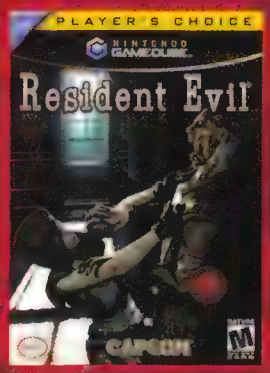

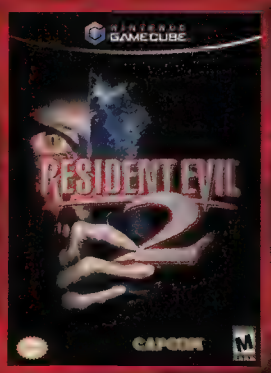

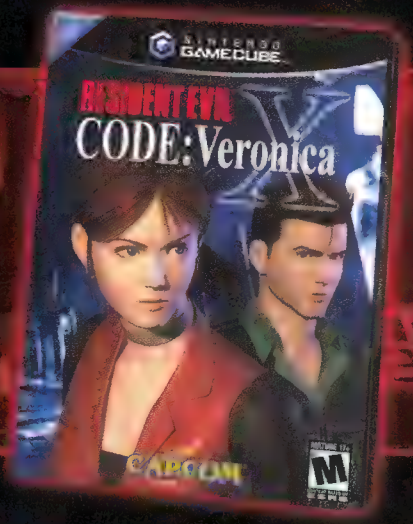

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Violence

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Rockstar Games Double Pack: Grand Theft Auto III & Vice City

Carjack in the 'box

system: xbox
developer: rockstar vienna
publisher: rockstar
available: november

Fire up those surveys, do-gooders of the world—you're back in business! It wasn't supposed to happen, yet here it is: Grand Theft Auto, meet Xbox. The horror! With the strain making its way to the 'box, in the form of GTA III and Vice City, Rockstar's close to achieving the next objective of the master plan. Brothers of the secret Rockstar army, the hour is near!

Chances are, I'll never get the chance to roust prostitutes, bludgeon passers by, join the mob to smoke some "problems," or work for a guy that lives on a boat and wears more jewelry than Mr. T. But I can dream...or play this lovely ensemble on Xbox, where the many enhancements will afford me a much more realistic and fluid look at my debauchery. After I squash some doper's head like a melon, I wanna see the fruits of my labor, you know what I mean? Here's a rundown of what to expect if you feel like crackin' some heads this holiday season...

The joys of specular lighting will allow objects to be illuminated by the light cast from every street lamp and headlight in real time, and all 50+ vehicles will now afford real-time reflections in concert with the different cars (so expensive sports car will be shiny and older heaps in need of Turtle Wax). Polygon counts are increased on both vehicles and characters, and updated skins will provide a much more seamless look. An enhanced particle system will juice the game's smoke, water sprays, rain drops (which now cling to the game's camera) and fire, nearly every texture in the game has been reinserted at a much higher resolution, HDTV 16x9 720P and Dolby 5.1 are supported, and the controls are now completely mapable. You can even create your own soundtrack by ripping CDs onto the Xbox hard drive, sending them to the new changer in the vehicle. Imagine the likes of this game to some raunchy old Metallica, Korn, Rob Zombie, Manson...the humanity!

And to all you kids out there hangin' at the mall waiting for that sucker who will buy you a copy: go home and watch SpongeBob SquarePants. If you break into my house in five years, I'm shootin' your ass.

"Polygon counts are increased on both vehicles and characters, and updated skins will provide a much more seamless look."

GTA III

GTA: Vice City

Double trouble for the X-box: GTA III and VC all dressed up...

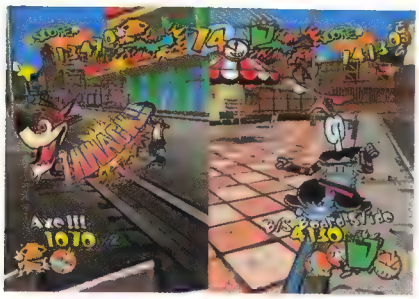
There are some individuals who would prefer that we not publish a game like Go! Go! Hypergrind.

Let them vent.

"Do you like skating? If you do then Go! Go! Hypergrind should rocket to the top of your "Must buy" list. You won't be disappointed."
- Nintendophiles

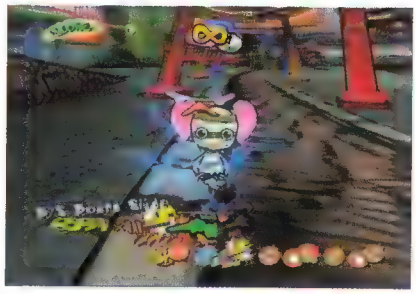
"Go! Go! Hypergrind is fast, fun, kooky, and it looks great."
- IGN.com

Skate as one of 12 crazy, cool competitors, designed by SPUMCO, the world-famous animation studio responsible for The Ren & Stimpy Show and The Ripping Friends!



Compete in a multitude of head-to-head multiplayer modes such as Push, Race and Battle!

Use the new "Negative Reaction" system to score insane points and begin your rise to stardom! Chain multiple Negative Reactions together with normal tricks for insane combination points!



Powerful graphics engine allows for real-time character deformation. The wacky, cel-shaded skateboarders can be subjected to numerous humiliations, such as being set on fire, flattened and covered in caca!

"...your ticket to many nights of great gaming."
- NintendoInsider.com

"...absolutely insane..." - GamesAreFun.com

CRUDE. CRAZY. CONSTITUTIONALLY PROTECTED.

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Spawn Armageddon

Insane clown posse

words dave halverson

system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: point of view
publisher: namco
available: november

I own way too much Spawn crap. I'm a card-carrying club member (it's no joke), the sucker that buys all the variants, and I have more Spawn comics and graphic novels than I care to admit. Todd McFarlane has way too much of my money, and if the current status of the Spawn game is any indication, he'll be getting a little more. Yes, it is true: Spawn is finally getting a good video game. After an abysmal showing on the PlayStation, he's following up his Dreamcast outing with a bangin' adventure that smacks of all things Armageddon, the event he's sworn to Malebolgia to bring about.

Enter the proverbial fly. The opposing forces of heaven have perfected experiments with Necroplasm and developed a super-weapon capable of blowing the hell out of hell once and for all—the first test shot of which opens a rift, spilling demons onto the streets of NYC. The second shot, once they find enough Necroplasm to power it, will obliterate hell once and for all, along with any hope of a Little Nicky sequel. Being the poster child for Necroplasm, Spawn's problems are twofold: heaven and hell both nip at his heels.

Point of View has done an admirable job translating the intensity and hellish nature of the Spawn universe into their gamescape. From the outset, Spawn (packing his axe from SCII) can launch his chains and explode prey, axe nicely with a lock-on and pummel, jump and thrust downward for a blood-spurting good time, or if all else fails, cast hell powers by absorbing the souls of the dearly departed. Fighting aside, Spawn has a double-jump glide that spreads his tattered cape for a limited time, uses his chains for grappling and has a nimble wall jump to assail tight spaces. Add in the aggressive fighting, a grinding soundtrack and excellent models, and we have a Spawn game that so far appears worthy of its namesake.

"...we have a Spawn game that so far appears worthy of its namesake."

Spawn plays pop goes the bad guy. Being derived from Necroplasm has its advantages.

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Cartoon Violence

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The Hobbit

The Prelude To The Lord Of The Rings

It's hard to believe that the third film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is already upon us—almost as hard to believe as the fact that it hasn't won a best picture Oscar. While we anticipate its ultimate cinematic conclusion, Bilbo's origins lay in wait across all three platforms—a great game that couldn't arrive at a better time.

words dave halverson

interview

Jaime Grieve
Producer, Inevitable

play: In terms of gameplay, this is certainly the best Tolkien game to date. Do you believe that it worked to your advantage not having to mimic the film, but rather draw from the Tolkien universe directly?
Jaime Grieve: Thank you very much. It definitely worked to our advantage to be able to draw from the rich Tolkien universe. It also allowed us the creative freedom to introduce our unique artistic style into the Tolkien and Hobbit universe.

In doing so, you've made some unique style choices, opting for narration over parchment drawings to tell your story and very uniquely exaggerated character designs, both of which are very effective. What lead you in this direction?
We wanted to bring the story of The Hobbit to life and felt the narrator was the key to telling the adventure of Bilbo Baggins. Similar to the movie *The Princess Bride* with Peter Falk, Tom Kane's rich voice made The Hobbit story live and breathe. Since The Hobbit was a children's story, with the character design, we wanted the art style to have a more Disneyesque style as opposed to the more realistic style that other Tolkien-based games have had.

You seem to have struck a nice balance the way you spend polygons, between models and draw distances. I assume you agree that compelling horizons add immensely to the epic feel of a game. Is this something you strove for, or just the luck of the draw?
We definitely wanted to create a feeling of an epic adventure and so we wanted to put visual shots in the game that would amaze the player. From the view from the outside of Bag End to the large caverns in Riddles in the Dark, we wanted the player to "ooh" and "aah" over the amazing sights. We spent a great deal of time on the technical and art side to ensure that we could handle the expansive environments and visuals.

It must be quite an honor to land a Tolkien contract. Did VU choose you or did you pitch them your vision?
We were approached by Sierra in the summer of 2001 to work on The Hobbit. We were nervous but extremely excited at the prospect of bringing to life one of the best epic adventures ever written. After two years of hard work by an amazing team, we believe the end result truly enhances the Tolkien universe.

Speaking of your vision, this is one of the best action-adventure-platforming games in recent memory. Were you a big Ocarina fan?
I am a big time Zelda fan in general. Many of the team members were also big fans of the Zelda series as well. In fact, in many of the elements of gameplay were very inspired by the franchise.

I noticed you simplified the bit in the Shire quite a bit compared to Fellowship's to-do list. Is it because Fellowship was unjustly flogged as a result?
We felt that people wanted a lot more action in the game and with the Shire being very well-protected from the dangers of the world that would provide for great action, we chose to have the tutorial take place in Hobbiton. We then moved the player quickly onto the action beginning in Roast Mutton.

One thing I didn't care for so much (check the honesty!) is how the power-ups lay in such contrast to the surroundings. Was this ever in question? I felt it took me out of the story somewhat.
This is something we discussed for quite a while, but we felt that the pickups were a gameplay necessity and so we needed to make them easier for the player to find. Prior to implementing the pickup glow, the pickups tended to be lost easily in the environment.

The acoustic guitar in your game is fantastic; in fact, the entire soundtrack is quite amazing. Who arranged your music?
The music score was written and mixed by Rednote Audio (formerly Slackmates) and performed by the Northwest Sinfonia Orchestra. The acoustic guitar was played by Rod Abernethy of Rednote Audio. We really enjoyed working with them and we were very happy with the quality of the music. We look forward to working with them on future projects as well.

Wasn't this game originally slated as a GameCube exclusive? Was the GameCube the lead platform?
At one time, there was the possibility of The Hobbit being a GameCube exclusive. The GameCube is in fact the lead platform. However, an extensive amount of time was spent bringing the adventure to the PlayStation 2 and Xbox as well.

What (if any) technology tweaks does the Xbox game afford? (I could have sworn that the Roast Mutton trolls' jelly-bellies had more polys in the Xbox version.) How about the PS2...is it on par with the GC and Xbox games?
We utilized the Xbox's anti-alias technology to give a smoother appearance to all of the characters and environments. We also supported HDTV for the true hardcore gamer. We feel very strongly that the PlayStation 2 version was on par with the other platforms—we spent a great deal of time working on the rendering of the materials to ensure the same visual quality.

Why is it that no ones uses bump mapping in multi-platform games? It was the big promise of the machine, and is supposedly a snap to do, but it's rarely implemented. Is there more to it than we think? Or would it just make the Xbox game look *too* good?
I'm not sure why other games have not done this yet. For us, we felt that the universe truly was rich and alive without utilizing the bump map technology.

What did you work on prior to The Hobbit? What's next?
I personally worked on sports titles including the All-Star Baseball series and on Tribes 2: Aerial Assault for the PlayStation 2. However, I have played action-adventure games for the past 25 years, from the game Adventure on the original Atari system to the latest incarnation of Zelda. The creative director for the Hobbit, Chuck Lupher, worked on Turok and the South Park franchises and also worked on games in the Ultima universe. As far as what's next, you'll have to wait and see.

You've put together a fantastic game. What would you say you're most proud of regarding The Hobbit?
Again, thank you very much. There are two things that I am most proud of: (1) that we successfully brought to life the story of The Hobbit, taking the player on an epic experience from the Shire to the Battle of Five Armies—we feel that we have both captured the essence of the book and provided an amazing gameplay experience—and (2) the development team with whom I was fortunate to work with and whose amazing technical, design, art and audio skills made this awesome game possible.

"...from the outside of Bag End to the large caverns in Riddles in the Dark, we wanted the player to 'ooh' and 'aah' over the amazing sights."

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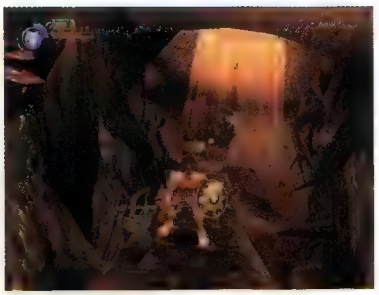
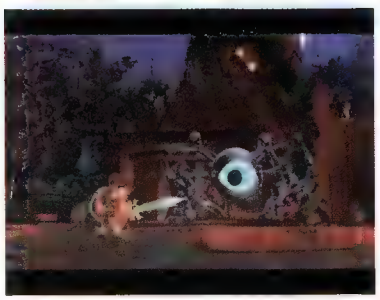
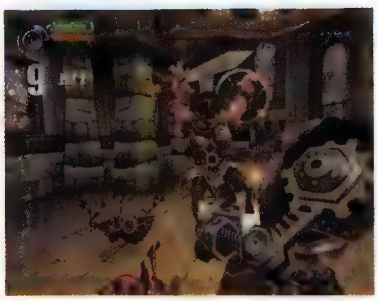
Maximo
vs. Army of Zin
Ghost in the machines







system: playstation 2
developer: capcom digital studios
publisher: capcom
available: january 2004

words dave halverson

Besides its dreaded pay-for-play aspects, I loved Maximo. Susumu Matsushita character designs in the capable hands of Capcom, in the vein of Ghouls 'n' Ghosts; what wasn't to love? Well, apparently the difficulty, as the game was branded too difficult for the masses. So what to do? Is it possible to tweak dynamic difficulty in such a way that hardcore players won't notice, while giving less than super-skilled players a chance for glory? Well, if you're Capcom, the answer is apparently yes. In that respect, Maximo 2 is surprisingly adept. In fact, the omnipresent helping hand is so cleverly guised, it's nearly impossible to detect, and on hard, well, Maximo is still a challenge worthy of its origins. What I'm having a difficult time with is the new, more traditional overworld map (being a big fan of hubs) and moreover the absence of nostalgia, as any trace of G&G seems to have been erased.

Surprisingly enough, zombies don't rise from their graves in M2. Maximo's new mecha foe—a fantastically modeled array of mecha zombies—sail in like death-dealing comets, crashing to the surface courtesy of Maximo's new nemesis, Zin. Fueled by stolen spirits—captured, compressed and housed in brain buckets affixed to all manner of nastiness—they only have eyes for you…and any villagers that happen by…the other new wrinkle in the action. Rather than simply have at you, Zin's soldiers' first order of business is to squash villagers—villagers with information, keys and coins Maximo needs. Although the item locations and hints they provide rarely make or break a scenario, that strange feeling of gamer guilt, standing over a fallen handmaiden's limp body (especially one cut from the ample-breasted Matsushita cloth) still plays on the conscience. Vendors are fair game too, and provide Maximo with much needed fixtures, like iron underpants (mmmm...comfy), provided he has the coin, so be merciful.

Elsewhere, things are as they should be: slightly tilted, dark, packed with heavily nuanced swordplay and platforming, and very much alive, although in lieu of Maximo's topographical changes, the game's new benefactors seem to have an eye on real-time events and clever diversions. There is much to be revealed once the game goes gold, but for now, Maximo's adventurous spirit seems alive and well. Not bad for a guy who sees dead people.

Vintage Susumu Matsushita in the house.

"Maximo's adventurous spirit seems alive and well."

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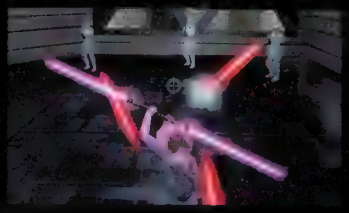

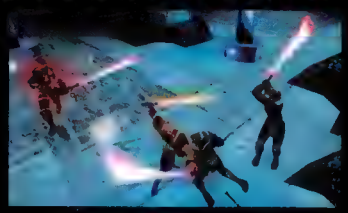

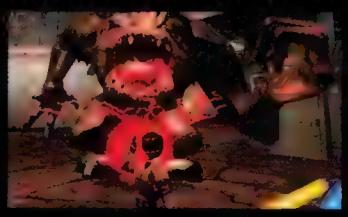

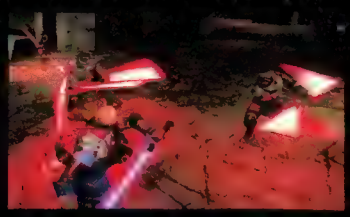

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True Crime The Streets of LA

Cleaning up the city streets, one dead punk at a time

words brady fiechter

system: playstation 2, xbox
developer: luxoflux
publisher: activision
available: november

So you're cruising Santa Monica Blvd., admiring the lovely sun sinking into the ocean down by the pier, and a call comes in on the radio alerting you of a robbery somewhere in Century City. There's a larger, more looming task at hand—basically your badge, and your life, are on the line—but you've got time to be savior for the day. You spin around to shoot down a side street. Oops. You nail a pedestrian, adding to your bad cop status. That's OK, because you don't care so much for caution; it's the way you choose to play the game, and the wake of destruction you leave matters nothing when placed next to your quest for personal redemption.

After enjoying the race to the scene of the crime—merely driving around in True Crime is a riot, and you're especially happy now that you've jacked a Benz for more speed—you smash a few assailants with your right bumper, sending another running for his life. Exiting the car, guns drawn, you send the crowd screaming, but Mr. Robber decides to stay put and unload a few shots. Oops. Guess he didn't notice that truck coming from the far lane. All dead: situation under control.

In True Crime: Streets of LA, the scenarios you face are endless, popping up all over the intricately modeled city streets. You've got a central story to follow, but there's so much activity going on all around to help fire up your skill points and abilities, you just have to do your part to clean the streets. Sometimes you have no choice but to go on routine patrol, punishment for screwing up your main objective, which may be as simple as going hand-to-hand with a couple bums in a dilapidated shack of an apartment or as grueling as taking out a wave of heavily armed thugs in a nightclub shootout, leaving the place in impressive ruin.

A few hours of gameplay left me quite enthused to see where Luxoflux has ultimately taken True Crime's broader design ideas. It doesn't seem nearly as loosely structured as Grand Theft Auto (yes, it is obviously an answer to that wildly popular game). The violence has some fantastical moments thrown in, maintaining less of a raw edge. It looks really good, and the variety in the gameplay—there's even some cool stealth missions—had me thoroughly engaged. If you mess up a key branch in the story, you can start the area over. If you decide to deal with the consequences of your screw-up, you might be sent down an entirely different path with newfound revelations. Three different endings exist, and you're constantly battling with a yin-yang approach to your actions.

There's a lot of structured, specific gameplay components to deal with here. I like being rated for my action, building a moves list, learning to better use weapons and grow as a skilled badass. The original soundtrack contains a ton of West Coast talent, fitting smoothly within the game's gritty world. Can't comment on the story yet, but the quality of the A-list voice acting is strong. Add it all up and I'm already more interested than I ever was with Grand Theft Auto.

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"Oops. Guess he didn't notice that truck coming from the far lane. All dead: situation under control."

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Prince of Persia
The Sands of Time
This Arabian prince has come a long way

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: ubi soft montreal
publisher: ubi soft
available: november

words brady fiechter

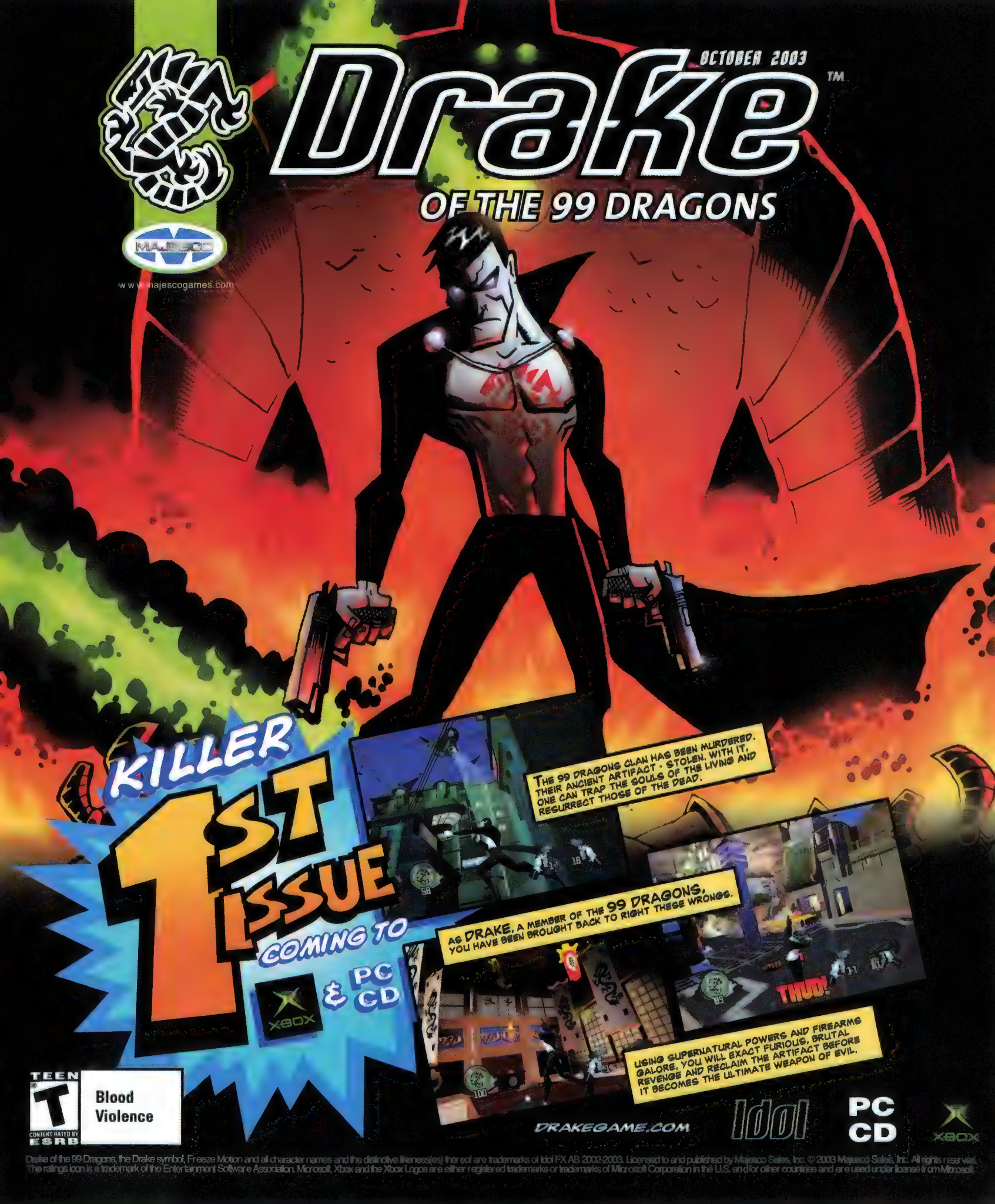
When it originated back in 1989 for PC and Macintosh, gaining console popularity a few years later, Prince of Persia was as deeply innovative as it was highly memorable. Sequels were made across a number of platforms throughout the years, but there was nothing offered quite like the original classic. The latest attempt to play off those fond memories of exceptional animations, perilous jumps and involving adventure through a palace space that, at the time, was preciously distinct is Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time. All these years later, much is obviously changing to fit the sophistication of modern game design, but the heart of the original is beating strong. To help preserve those special qualities dreamed up by series creator Jordan Mechner, the man himself was brought into the Montreal studios to take part as a consultant, eventually lending a hand in the story and supervising voiceovers.

What strikes me as most intriguing about The Sands of Time so far is that, like the original, it takes place in one enormous, labyrinthine palace that captures immense wonder. You don't simply go from room to room, fighting and jumping and solving puzzles before going to the next inevitable point of attack. The strength of a complete world environment is receiving obvious focus, with visual cues of areas you've been to and will inevitably adventure towards folded into the exploration. I felt like I was returning to Ico a bit, which should be considered the highest praise.

The acrobatics behind the platforming elements of The Sands of Time are extensive and visually exciting, naturally matched within the scope of the setting. One of the first things you learn to do is run across walls, which never grows old, and from there, all sorts of nuanced moves begin to take shape. With hundreds of hand-animated responses to your unique command of the character, the game pulls you in visually as much as with the deliberate mechanic of what you are doing.

> "Much is obviously changing to fit the sophistication of modern game design, but the heart of the original is beating strong..."

Combat is also a big part of the experience. The prince faces continually growing resistance, often from groups of attackers, who must be disposed of one at a time with sword and dagger. The only change in weapons is the evolution of the sword, which goes through some dramatic changes. The Sands of Time looks like it's going to be nicely challenging, but with the ability to rewind time, an entirely unique spin is being placed on the way you approach certain situations. Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is certainly reaching to travel well beyond the ancient classic.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Dead Man's Hand

The romantic allure of the wild west is translated into an FPS

words brady fiechter

system: xbox
developer: human head studios
publisher: atari
available: december

"Riding on the aged Unreal engine, the game doesn't turn heads with overwhelming sophistication, but the attention to finer details paints the western canvas in fine style"

Back... in black.

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Crash Nitro Kart

Well it's about time—Crash Team Racing inspires the next kart racer set in the Crash universe

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: vicarious visions
publisher:vu games
available: november

words brady fiechter

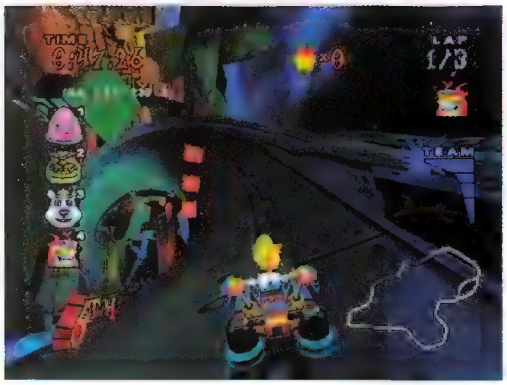
The last time a great kart racer... Scratch that. The last time a good kart racer... No, scratch that. When *was* the last time a quality, colorful, console kart racer was even released? The only one that immediately comes to mind is the wildly entertaining Crash Team Racing, a well-aged PlayStation classic still entirely worth playing. With Mario Kart finally getting its console sequel after far, far too long of a wait—how can you forget the ridiculous joys of watching your buddy's balloon get popped far off in the distance by a red shell shot from above?—the genre is getting some support again, and wouldn't you know it, Mario Kart 64's only real competition, Crash Team Racing, happens to be getting its overdue sequel around the same time. Let the games begin.

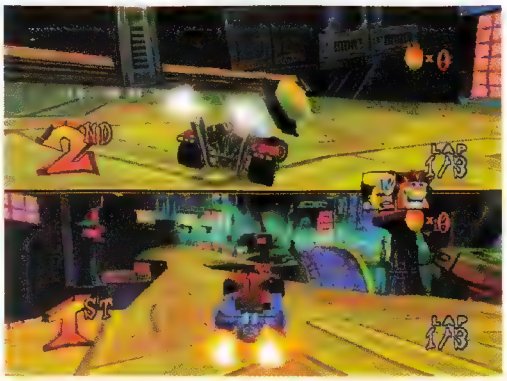
I suppose Crash Nitro Kart isn't officially billed as a sequel, but it sure does look and play the part. All the characters are returning, and a few new faces are making the rounds to race across a galactic coliseum, where Crash has been taken after being kidnapped by Emperor Velo. Crash must save the earth and... Ok, so this isn't a game hinged on story, but it is fun to have a little silly dialogue pushing the visuals along.

All that really matters here is how addictive the racing is. With the CTR template to go off of, Nitro Kart is on its way to a solid kart-racing experience. The game is set up in a hub-based universe, where earnings open new portals to 17 raceways. You know what to expect by now from the Crash universe: all the colors of a blinding rainbow paint the visual palette, angular structures dot the landscape of jungles and cities and space stations, classically drawn cartoons capture a simplistic charm.

A powerslide system drives the racing mechanic, building a power meter depending on the length you hold a turn or jump. Weapons run the traditional gamut, with such Crash-inspired items as bombs, energy shots and land mines collected by exploding crates that line the track. Some of the courses offer the thrill only new technology can deliver—boost straight up dense stretches of courses to crazy heights, wind through transparent corkscrew highways. No one can argue the segmented appeal of Crash Nitro Kart's diminishing, by-the-numbers kind, but as long as they continue to make them, I'm on the side gladly waiting to play the next one in line.

"I suppose Crash Nitro Kart isn't officially billed as a sequel, but it sure does look and play the part."





(Wait 'til you see the one left in your pants.)

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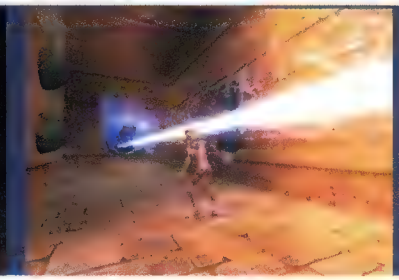
Sphinx

And The Cursed Mummy

Multifaceted gameplay polished with mythological appeal

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: eurocom
publisher: thq
available: november

words chris hoffman



Like so many other games recently, Sphinx And The Cursed Mummy is a title trying to break the mold. The colorful visuals, expressive cartoon characters and jumping-oriented gameplay make it tempting to place it into the traditional platforming category; however, as the game progresses, it becomes clear that Sphinx owes as much to The Legend of Zelda as it does Jak & Daxter.

Sphinx's gameplay hinges on its two distinct main characters: Sphinx, a half-human demigod, and the Mummy, one Prince Tutankhamen who is suddenly suffering a case of living-dead syndrome. As the title implies, Sphinx gets most of the glory; he's all about adventure. Even though he can swim, climb, hang and swing with the best platforming heroes out there, his stages run much deeper than that, with a hearty mix of fighting, puzzle-solving and jumping/timing challenges. He starts with a limited number of moves, but as Sphinx progresses through his quest, he learns many more tricks, becoming a master swordsman and earning abilities like monster-capturing and the requisite double jump. Sphinx even has access to shops, minigames, sub-quests and an entire city to explore.

At set points in the game, control switches over to the Mummy, who had been given up for dead—in fact, he is—and is rotting away in the villains' stronghold, Uruk Temple. Fortunately, being dead has its advantages: he can't be killed. As such, the Mummy's stages, which make up about 40 percent of the game, are more about stealth and puzzle-solving; he has no offensive attacks. Like an undead Wario, the Mummy can be electrocuted, set on fire, sliced up, squished flat and more, all of which are used to his advantage to solve puzzles and thwart his enemies' plans from right under their noses.

The game also makes its mark with its unique aesthetic, delving into the robust and relatively untapped mythos of ancient Egypt. The setting itself inspires wonder, and characters and architecture are innately appealing. Temples, towns and seas of sand appear awash in a rich palette of purples, yellows and blues, and an entrancing, moody Western-meets-Arabic score adds to the flavor. Also, representations of Egyptian mythological figures such as Anubis, Imhotep and Horus appear to play roles in Sphinx's quest.

So far, Sphinx is a game of vast scope that continues to improve as it progresses. A wider viewing angle would be nice, and save points seem a little sparse, but one thing seems certain: Sphinx And The Cursed Mummy will stand out from the crowd.

"Like an undead Wario, the Mummy can be electrocuted, set on fire, sliced up, squished flat and more."

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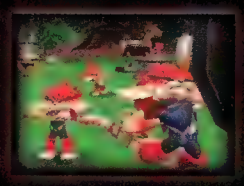

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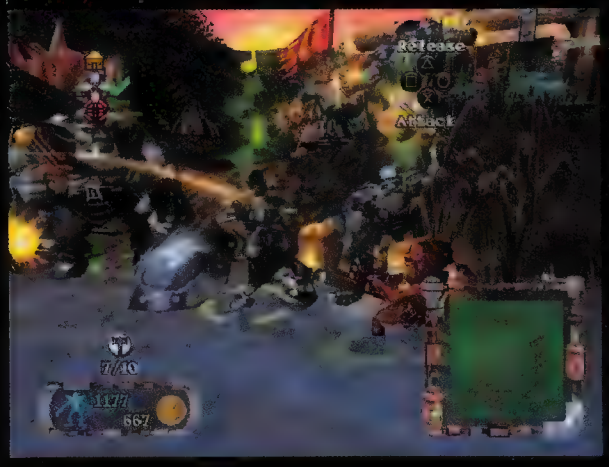
Goblin Commander

The grunts of war

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: jaleco
publisher: jaleco
available: november

words dave halverson



Gives a whole new meaning to the term "stoner."

Of all the games to find myself entranced with this time of year, the last one I thought might hook me was Goblin Commander. When I hear the words "real-time strategy," I normally fake a hand injury, but Chris and Ron Millar of Blizzard fame (both played key roles in all three Warcraft games, Starcraft and both Diablos) have sought to blend complex strategy with real-time action and, much to my amazement, actually pulled it off. This is the most fun I've had manipulating troops since Cannon Fodder on the Jaguar.

The secret lies in the comprehensive training—slowly bringing console die-hards like me up to speed—amidst a universe that, unless you're some kind of girly-man, is just wickedly cool. You begin by taking command of the Stonekrusher clan, the most primitive of all the goblin tribes, responsible for amassing resources for the great machine being fashioned by their human master, the wizard Fraziel, the glue that holds the clans together. The game begins when Fraziel mysteriously disappears, leaving the commanders to their own devices, and goblins, well, they're not the most tactful or intelligent bunch.

Like most RTS games, you find yourself lording over several ranks of legions, placing defensive weapons strategically to overcome obstacles, controlling über-beasts to crush (or eat) the enemy, making all sorts of command decisions to best forge ahead, conserving troops while earning the necessary commerce (in this case Runestones) to beef-up and amass inventory...all things that normally induce sleep rather than pleasure. The pervading sin committed by these otherwise formidable games (don't they always look so pretty on those PC boxes?) is that for all the management tedium, the payoff is usually clicking points and watching the action like a puppet master stuck at a work station. I've often wondered why no one ever thought to let the player in on the carnage, and not from on high, but from a true 3D perspective. My quandary is now satisfied; herein lies the beauty of this game. And while plodding around a bunch of foul creatures is imminently satisfying, the Millars have taken it a step further in the right direction, again straying from the norm by framing the action in the proper light. Rather than play it up militarily with the usual battle hymns, they drape the action in trippy neo-prog; mystic rhythms settle you into the world, rather than brand you a spectator, and go out of their way depicting the brutal state of the goblin world.

Between this and Gladius, an emerging trend of console-friendly strategy games seems to be brewing, and what enchanting diversions they are in the wake of the manic action that comprises so much of a console's repertoire. It's enough to make a person think.

> "This is the most fun I've had manipulating troops since Cannon Fodder on the Jaguar."

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Final Fantasy X-2

Nomura's angels: Finally a Fantasy continues

words: [illegible]

system: [illegible]
developer: [illegible]
publisher: [illegible]
available: [illegible]

Tetsuya Nomura (the main character designer behind Parasite Eve, The Bouncer, Brave Fencer Musashi, and Final Fantasy VII, VIII and X) has enchanted us with so much style over the years that substance became an added bonus—the combined essence of which he has now channeled into the sublime, first-ever direct Final Fantasy sequel. Yuna, Rikku and Paine are the epitome of the female form and spirit, embodied within a legend reborn—a Final Fantasy so new, it barely resembles its predecessors and so utterly gorgeous it belongs in a time capsule.

The last thing I expected was a mission-based RPG fixed to a central hub, let alone tethered to a giant elaborate flying chopper, but that's exactly what's in store.

It's called the Celsius, and it comes complete with a room-sized gleaming V-Twin engine, massive dual forks, giant chrome headers, and Apehanger handlebars—no kidding. Creating a home for their first-ever all-female cast, the architects of X-2 have ostensibly merged Western biker chic with the series' flair for the ornate, resulting in a look unlike anything I've ever seen or imagined for the series. Change is definitely afoot, along with an obvious eye on the West and the promise our booming market holds. Paine, strong, silent and a dead ringer for Lisa Marie Presley, is quite unlike any FF character I've ever encountered, and Rikku's brother—conveniently named Brother, also the leader of the Gullwings—resembles something of a white Dennis Rodman: yellow Mohawk, covered in tattoos and piercings, and way too comfortable with his feminine side. Meanwhile, Rikku and Yuna remain every man's fantasy: young, perfect, free spirited, and, above all, ageless. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

X-2 would really be great if it had a real-time massage engine...hey!

X-2 begins two years after the events of Final Fantasy X, during "The Eternal Calm," the peace brought about by Yuna's pilgrimage to defeat Sin, in a story spurred by a 12-minute story included on a bonus DVD in Japan's FFX International. We find her (well, sort of...I wouldn't want to spoil it) on stage, giving a concert in Luca, a sight so utterly captivating I nearly wept. Soon after, on board the Celsius, we come to know the new Yuna, now a sphere hunter, scouring peacetime Spira for spheres that contain moving pictures, sound or other forms of data. A sphere depicting what looks like Tidus confronting an omni-powerful "machina" weapon known as Vegnagun is what prompted her to join the Gullwings (well, that and Rikku's prodding) at a time when she is still struggling to get on with her life, overcome her angelic persona, and find some type of closure regarding Tidus.

From here, however, the story begins to unfold like a bad cell phone connection as little bits and pieces of the big picture begin to pour in from locations throughout Spira as the Gullwings go about their business, beating their rival LeBlanc (oh, the joys of LeBlanc) to the spheres, touching down to investigate sightings and hopefully bring back the goods. No linear trek in sight; you are on your own. Spira lies open before you. Progression comes by way of completing missions in each chapter, prompted by "Hot Spots," but you can play them in whatever order you choose or investigate sights with no mission at all, reeling in the changes the Eternal Calm has brought about. The Zanarkand Ruins (the site of Yuna's last stand) has become a tourist attraction, and back on Besaid, Waka and Lulu are expecting a child and living peacefully. The biggest problem, other than the rogue "fiends" served up as fodder for the new battle system, seems to be corralling wild Chocobos, remnants of the old Spira, which has begun slowly reverting back to the ways of Al Bhed and the use of machina.

Producer Yoshinori Kitase seems to have taken the best bits of VII, VIII and X and merged them with a new vision to create the quintessential Fantasy, evolving the series to the point of a new genesis. X-2 begins as a peacetime RPG—a fun, carefree trek laden with unspeakably gorgeous topography and the kind of comedic interaction only Square can muster. Early missions are of average duration and utterly spelled out, serving for the most part as a gateway to the new Spira—a living, breathing continent with its own system of commerce, worship, games and emerging forms of government. There's no shortage of diversions either—from reptile races (Square Frogger, very cool) to chasing down Chocobos to complex jumping and shooting sorties riddled with timing cues. Nothing can prepare you for the first-ever girl-on-girl massage engine, though, the mini-game to beat all mini games! The dawn of X-2 is a departure for sure, initially feeling more like Skies of Arcadia than Final Fantasy—bubbly, somber, almost garishly western, and set to an uncharacteristically upbeat score. And then...it changes.

If you're a fan of the series' more tinker-worthy iterations, shifting the cursor about to that ever-familiar squelch, sifting through layers of complex menus, watching attributes rise and fall, you're going to love X-2's Garment Grids, Dresspheres, gates and new accessories system. Dresspheres, which you gain throughout the game, can be placed on any number of Garment Grids (which amass as events progress), depicting the different forms you can Spherechange into during battle, like Warrior, Thief, Songstress, White Mage, Gunner, etc., each with its own set of

Job Change System

Looks that kill: Spherechange into Warrior, Thief, Songstress, White Mage, Gunner and more...

A Power Rangers moment courtesy of your friendly neighborhood Gullwings!

"Yuna, Rikku and Paine are the epitome of the female form and spirit, embodied within a legend reborn..."

auto-abilities depending on the accessories you have equipped (one of the few things to buy in the game, although you can find them as well). In between each Dressphere on a Garment Grid is a gate depicting an attribute (spell, strength, agility, etc.). Passing through the gate on the grid during battle (through a Spherechange), the character will pick up that attribute for the next turn, so as you amass grids and Dresspheres the variables in battle begin to build accordingly. You only level up the Dressphere you have equipped, so character management practically becomes a game unto itself.

The Spherechanges themselves, when triggered during battle, represent a level of visual euphoria I can't possibly describe except to say that I haven't been as visually arrested since laying eyes on The Spirits Within. Summoning Aeons was spectacular, but concentrating that spiritual bliss on the female form is like an epiphany. While I find myself at twilight of my go-round with turn-based RPGs, I found the battles in X-2 so engaging that for the first 10 hours I could barely contain my excitement, and by the time I began to tire of their frequency, I'd acquired accessories to either slow or speed-up their frequency, depending on how comfortable I was with my current levels—a brilliant solution to the age-old walk-fight ratio dilemma.

In league with the integrity of the battle system, the creatures in X-2 have also been born anew, and rank as my favorite the series has ever produced. I am in awe of their diversity and integrity, from the smallest mammalian pest to the massive metallic behemoths. Between the vistas and grandeur throughout the many faces of Spira, and especially the characters—Rikku, Paine, and Yuna (to me the essence of video games)—this is the single most beautiful video game I have ever laid eyes on. Without games like this as an anchor, the entire idea of interactive entertainment falls apart. The animation applied to every nuance of emotion surrounding the main cast is extraordinary, and the level of immersion into the world induced by slowly integrating the peril, transitioning it from peace, is, in a word, brilliant.

About midway through X-2, The Eternal Calm begins to fade as the New Yevon and Youth Guild begin to gain momentum. Split by conflicting ideals for the direction of Spira, each looking for the endorsement of the High Summoner (Yuna), the Gullwings find themselves in a precarious situation, but not before we've come to know them as free spirits. What a brilliant concept to journey through a liberated world and witness people slowly backsliding, taking their salvation for granted, as people do. Watching Yuna's friends and loved ones caught up in the struggle, and she, the instrument of their salvation, cast once again into the role of savior, all the while longing in her heart for the one that got away...

After one of the sweetest plot twists in Final Fantasy history, the game takes its dramatic turn, and much like the payoff when the castle flipped upside down in Symphony of the Night, you just sit back and smile.

Where X-2 goes from here will have to wait, as I'm not at liberty to review the game at this time. Currently I've just run up against the math equivalent of blitzball—a little game called Sphere Break...

I, for one, am enthralled by Square's choice to continue this particular adventure, and moreover, to cast females in the lead roles. I like the mission based set-up as well, and the way the girls return home to their colorful shipmates and the camaraderie they share. Heck, I'm even starting to like Waka. Thank God it's the off season for blitzball.

R Racing Evolution

Big changes are in store for this entry in the Ridge Racer legacy. We spoke with R: Racing Evolution's director, Hideo Teramoto, about his latest endeavor

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: namco
publisher: namco
available: december

Interview
Hideo Teramoto **R: Racing Evolution Director**
Previous Credits: R4, Ridge Racer V and Klonoa

interview by michael hobbs

play: What makes R: Racing Evolution different from R4 and Ridge Racer V?
Hideo Teramoto: R: Racing Evolution is a game with completely different styles from the Ridge Racer series. It features real cars and real courses and also has a newly designed behavior program based on a realistic simulator. However, it inherited the cool feelings which the Ridge Racer series has been investigating. Let's think of it as an entirely new game with the philosophy of Ridge Racer.

Is the inclusion of the Racing Life mode a new idea, or was this something you had been thinking about adding in the last two games?
In R: Racing Evolution, we wanted to feature the human battle in a realistic racing game. As you know, there was a story mode in R4 also, but this time an idea of the story mode was created specifically for R: Racing Evolution.

Which is the more difficult task: modeling licensed cars or creating original designs?
This is a tough question. Licensed cars have their difficulty, and original designs have their own difficulty as well. You can't simply compare them. The challenging part of the licensed cars in R: Racing Evolution is that they have their histories and cultures. Namco's visual staff spent a lot of time understanding those. It wasn't an easy job, but as a result we believe we made great modelings.

One of my favorite aspects of Ridge Racer is its beautiful drifting physics. It wasn't necessarily realistic, but it was very addictive. Does R: Racing Evolution continue this arcade-style tradition?
The physics of R: Racing Evolution were a completely new design, so it is not quite as the Ridge Racer arcade style. It is different, but we are sure that it will be addictive too. Please see it for yourself and enjoy.

What is your overriding philosophy on what makes a game identifiable as Ridge Racer?
The level of reality that the players can feel with their minds and senses; not the reality only based on physics calculation and numbers. It is always our philosophy to explore the comfort like in music rather than boring preciseness.

Ridge Racer features some of the best track layouts of any racing series. How do you go about designing courses that are not only attractive but incredibly satisfying to race around?
We were being careful with not only layouts but also viewing design. At a design stage, we ran courses thousands of times and adjusted them thousands of times. Being picky and detailed without compromise is the secret to make the best layouts.

I would rather have one perfected track than 10 boring ones. How do you balance the workload between creating a variety of tracks and perfecting each of them from a racing point of view?
At first we decided the various themes for each track, then we spent a lot of time investigating the driving comfort. For R: Racing Evolution, both the balance of the tracks and perfecting them are equally important and not to

"We think that R: Racing Evolution will become a game which will show gamers a new vision just like the first Ridge Racer did in 1993."

Hideo Teramoto **R: Racing Evolution Director**

between them. That is the philosophy of R.

The Ridge Racer games have always had a great look and feel and a great sense of style in the menus and interface. Who worked on this aspect of R: Racing Evolution, and what was the overriding theme?
The same artist who did MotoGP worked on this. The style will be different from Ridge Racer series, so please wait and see how great this is.

Would you compare the look of R: Racing Evolution to any previous Ridge Racer, or is it a completely fresh visual approach?
The look of R: Racing Evolution has been created with the awareness of other Namco titles such as MotoGP, the Ace Combat series, and so forth. In a good way, the artists in the same company are competing with each other and trying to make better products than everyone else. As a result, several unique visual approaches were created for R.

Has it been a burden trying to create a game that can run well across all three platforms? Which system represented the greatest challenges?
We have experienced a different kind of difficulty in the multi-platform development from ordinary single-platform development. We have our goals and visions, and in order to accomplish them we had different challenges for each of the three platforms.

How far has this game advanced graphically since Ridge Racer V? Would you say the greatest gains have come from the ability to add more polygons to the image, or from new ways of manipulating textures and simulating lighting?
It has been three and a half years since the release of Ridge Racer V in 2000. From every aspect, it has evolved. In order to provide the best visual game, we used a lot of new ideas from the theory of CG.

A Ridge Racer game with licensed cars. Rest assured however that the gameplay experience will be vastly different from Gran Turismo. It will no doubt retain the soul of Ridge Racer.

How interested are you in pleasing fans of the series? Are you more interested in challenging yourself or in trying to create a game based on a guess of what the user wants?
We are very interested in pleasing the fans. What we did from the beginning was to start thinking of all the great components and features of other games in the genre, and use that as a starting point. It is our goal that not only the fans of the Ridge Racer series will enjoy this game, but also the fans of all the current racing games.

Finally, would you like to say anything to Ridge Racer fans eagerly awaiting R: Racing Evolution?
We have been feeling lately that the realistic racing game genre needs to be spiced up a bit. We believe that there are still many possibilities in the realistic racing genre, and we have seriously researched these new possibilities. We think that R: Racing Evolution will become a game which will show gamers a new vision just like the first Ridge Racer did in 1993. Please enjoy our new racing game.

Gotcha Force

system: gamecube / **developer:** capcom / **publisher:** capcom / **available:** december

Take more than 100 wicked-cool, distinctly Japanese toy designs, throw them into an arena combat game, and what you get is Gotcha Force. Players can amass armies from over 100 toys, all varying in strength, speed, weapons and abilities, then participate in story mode or arcade-style bouts with up to four players. Battles are survival-style, with a new team member coming in as the previous is defeated, until only one side is left standing. The key is collecting as many toys as you can, and then creating the ideal team. Gotcha Force seems likely to take the collect-'em-all mentality to new heights. -CH

Rise To Honor

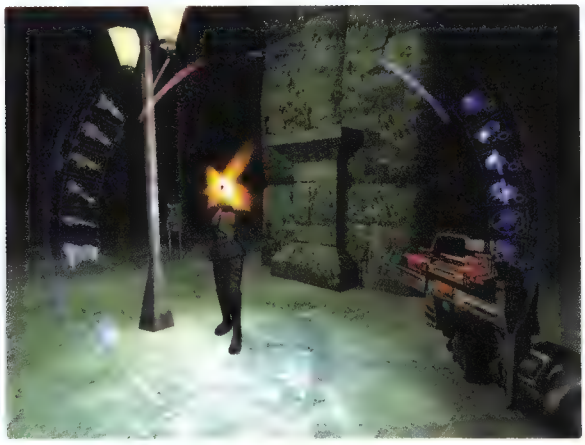
system: ps2 / **developer:** scea / **publisher:** scea / **available:** january

Say hello to Jet Li. No really, he's running around in my TV right now, through action scenarios courtesy of Hollywood fight choreographer Cory Yuen, starring in a deep story laced with intrigue and betrayal. Neat! Imagine the chase sequences in Shenmue (where you press triggers in concert with obstacles Jet must overcome) interjected with dual-analog 360-degree fighting, set to pristine animation that mirrors the fighting style of Jet Li, and that's Rise of Honor, the action game to watch in the coming months, especially if you're hip to the cinematic trappings of Hong Kong filmmaking. -DH

Deus Ex: Invisible War

system: xbox, pc / **developer:** ion storm / **publisher:** eidos / **available:** november

Set 15 years after the compelling events of the first Deus Ex, this promising sequel is capturing a lot of the similar qualities that made up the critically acclaimed first-person RPG original. Many gameplay features have been carried over, with improvements being made exactly where they needed to be. (That previously cumbersome interface got a nice facelift.) The idea behind Invisible War is the ability to play through with a boundless freedom. Dangerous scenarios can be diffused in a number of unique ways, requiring that you apply a new set of logic to how you might normally approach your gameplay. -CH



SpyHunter 2

system: ps2, xbox, gc / **developer:** angel studios / **publisher:** midway / **available:** november

Again in the vein of the arcade classic, players will get behind the wheel of the G-8155 Interceptor and engage in some mission-based driving/shooting action. The main campaign mode spans more than 20 missions, in locales like Russia, Asia, Switzerland and the good ol' USA, and as before, the G-8155 will be able to transform into a cycle and boat, plus new forms, such as a ski-mobile or off-road vehicle. Rounding out the game are multiplayer modes, including versus races and deathmatches, and a co-op campaign where the second player assists with the weaponry. -CH

Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 2

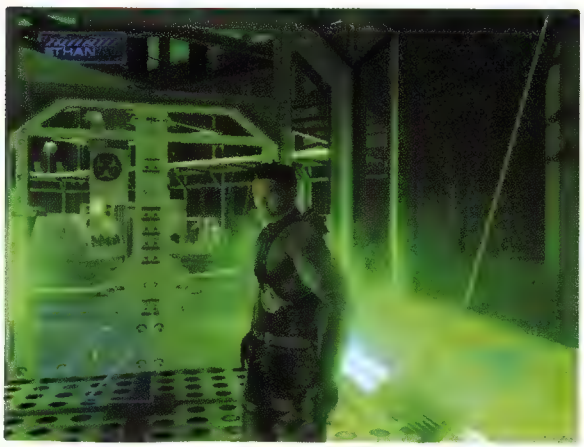
system: ps2 / **developer:** dimps / **publisher:** atari / **available:** december

The first Dragon Ball Z: Budokai sold remarkably well last year, so it's no surprise that we're being treated to a sequel. So far, Budokai 2 looks and plays a lot like its predecessor in terms of the actual fighting, but the big change is the new Dragon Mode. Instead of the linear progression of one-on-one battles that the first game offered, Dragon Mode is a board-game like quest where Goku and friends obtain power-ups, fight enemies, and ultimately obtain the sacred Dragon Balls. The game also features 34 characters and the ability to fuse characters into more powerful forms. *-CH*

Kunoichi (Nightshade)

system: ps2 / **developer:** overworks / **publisher:** sega / **available:** q4

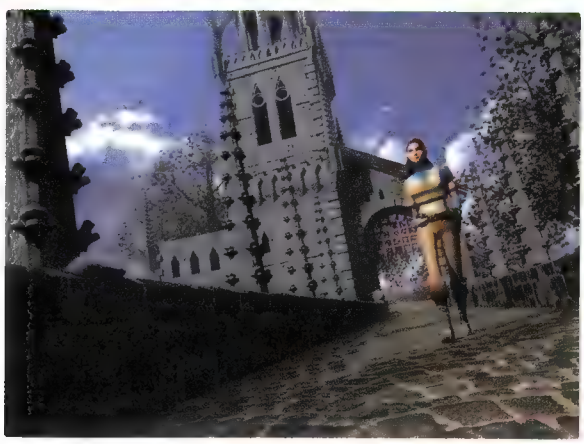
This side story to Shinobi chronicles the events following Hotsuma's victory over Hiroku's evil minions, when (as with all sealed Japanese evil entities) a new rift opens between the human and demon realms. To do the demon-slaying honors in Hiroku's absence, the Japanese government enlists the services of "Kunoichi," a skilled female ninja experienced in both martial and mystical arts. Although the game's structure looks much like the mostly mediocre PS2 Shinobi, an enhanced combat system, with greater depth, more attacks and more aerial action should liven things up. *-DH*



Mission Impossible: Operation Surma

system: ps2, xbox, pc / **developer:** paradigm / **publisher:** atari / **available:** november

Some nasty dude named Algo is working to unleash an insidious computer virus on the world, but that's not going to happen, because you're a tech guru with all sorts of cool gadgets, perfect for thwarting any dangerous situation imaginable. In Mission Impossible: Operation Surma, one of the more valuable of these handy devices is the digital binocular, which allows Ethan to snap photos and use them to digitize faces for the creation of custom masks. Beyond the use of spy tools, some hand-to-hand fighting and lots of stealth technique come into play. *-BF*



Neverend

system: xbox, pc / **developer:** mayhem studios / **publisher:** tba / **available:** 2004

Agavaen, an ancient fairy with broken wings, wants nothing more than to live a [illegible] Friend or common foe, she's [illegible] by the thieves she finds come to live with. Agavaen sets out on a journey across the land to become a real fairy once again. Such is the premise of Neverend, a Nintendo RPG that seems inspired by the Final Fantasy series. Featuring a combination of pre-rendered and real-time backgrounds graphics for maximum flexibility, as well as an active time battle system, Neverend could be the type of RPG that the Xbox has been lacking. *-CH*

BC

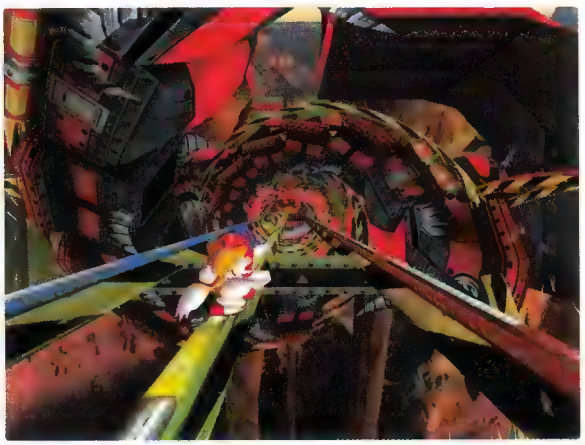
system: xbox / **developer**: intrepid / **publisher**: microsoft / **available**: 2004

We still have a bit of time before BC hits the Xbox, but the latest screens indicate that the game is well on track to suck players back into prehistory. It seems you won't play BC so much as live it, leading your tribe, hunting for food, strategically battling dinosaurs and ensuring the survival not only of your group, but essentially the entire human race. Nature itself will be your ally if used advantageously, but the elements can also be harsh, with environments ranging from deserts to rainforests to the arctic cold. Even selective breeding comes into play; only the strong survive. *-CH*

Sonic Heroes

system: ps2, xbox, gc / **developer**: sonic team / **publisher**: sega / **available**: january

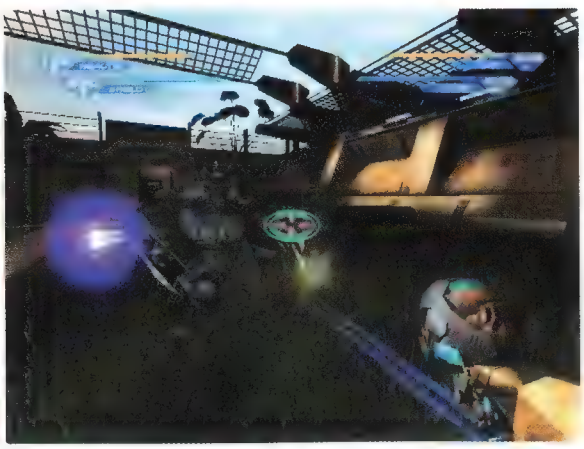
"We decided to license RenderWare, because the solution provided us with not only the technology, but also the best methodologies for efficient multi-platform development, enabling our team to focus on what really makes Sonic stand out." So says Yuji Naka, head honcho of Sonic Team, genius game designer extraordinaire. Looking at Sonic Heroes, one can only ponder what took him so long. Sonic hasn't had a day in the sun since his Dreamcast debut, so it is with much excitement we prepare for a proper Sonic New Year, with a few friends from the 32X game of legend, Chaotix, in tow! *-DH*



Unreal II

system: xbox / **developer**: tantalus interactive / **publisher**: atari / **available**: december

As a console FPS lover, my tastes are bit removed from the PC deathmatch world, which is exactly why Unreal II is so appealing: a huge single-player adventure is part of the draw. There have been complaints that Unreal II on PC was just too short. No worries on Xbox, as the game has been substantially beefed up. In the gorgeous campaign mode, all the weapons from that past Unreals are available, with more tossed in for the ultimate firepower. For those who crave the exceptional multiplayer component of Unreal, Xbox Live support is going beyond the PC with the addition of class systems. *-BF*



007: Everything or Nothing

system: ps2, xbox, gc / **developer**: ea redwood shores / **publisher**: ea / **available**: february 2004

To go along with the gadgets, shootouts, driving, flying, and all-out Bond-ness of the latest 007 game, EA has a load of star power backing Everything or Nothing. Pierce Brosnan is a given, but also reprising their film roles are John Cleese as Q, Judi Dench as M, and Richard Kiel as Jaws. Nikolai Diavolo, Shannon Elizabeth and Heidi Klum have parts as well. In addition, Grammy-winning artist Mya will sing the game's title song (and also appear as Bond girl Mya Starling) and Emmy-nominated composer Sean Callery will handle the musical score. *-CH*

Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds

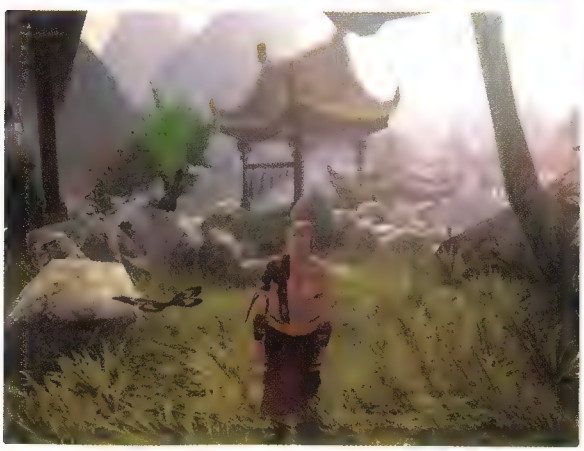
system: xbox / **developer:** secret level / **publisher:** atari / **available:** november

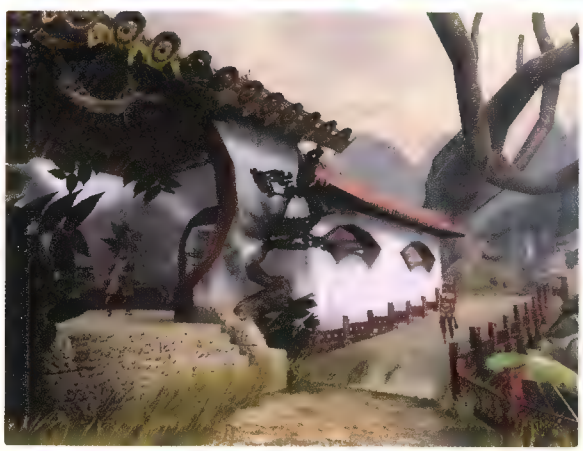
Imagine a mixture of a one-on-one fighting game and a real-time strategy title, and you'll come pretty close to what Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds is all about. Two mages square off against one another, and victory is determined by using mana crystals to summon creatures, unleashing elemental spells and casting enchantments straight from the card game, although they can also get physical if the need arises. The game offers both an Arcade Mode for quick battles (which will be playable online via Xbox Live), and a Quest Mode where you can earn new abilities and customize your character. *-CH*

Fable

system: xbox / **developer:** big blue box / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** spring 2004

Peter Molyneux's Fable is still a ways off, but the most recent look at the game is looking quite striking. In this very ambitious way of presenting a role-playing world, your very specific actions determine the organic development of your character. If you eat too much, you get fat. If you work hard, your muscles expand accordingly. Stick around the sun too much, your skin becomes like leather. Going from a child to adult to the edge of death, your every move determines your very personality. Do you choose evil or goodness? Exactly how all this will play out in a gaming environment is a fascinating mystery. *-BF*

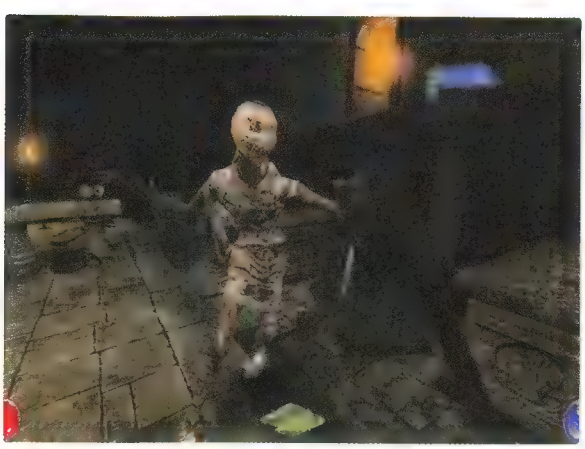




Jade Empire

system: xbox / **developer:** bioware / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** tba

After the monumental success of KOTOR, which I'm still trying to understand, you're going to be hearing a lot about Jade Empire, BioWare's hyper-ambitious mini-series of a do-everything RPG set in a new fantastical world based on mythical China, where sinister events have upset the peaceful harmony of an isolated martial arts school. The words Hong Kong cinema are being tossed about (surprised?), as well as a Chinese laundry list of fighting styles and mystical powers. Go find an Xbox if you don't have one; the Land of Howling Spirits and gardens of the Imperial City won't be coming to a PS2 or GC. *-DH*



Arx Fatalis

system: xbox / **developer:** arkane / **publisher:** dreamcatcher / **available:** november

You wake up in a goblin prison cell with no memory, virtually no clothes, and nothing but your wits to get you out alive. Just like the PC original, part of this fantasy RPG is unraveling the mystery; the rest is combat, stealth, exploration, puzzle-solving and spell-casting from a first-person perspective. Arx Fatalis promises to be deep and complex, and boast a unique magic system where you cast spells by actually combining and drawing rune symbols with the controller. Hopefully, the graphical and control issues in our preview copy will be worked out. *-CH*

kill.switch

system: ps2, xbox
developer: namco
publisher: namco
available: october

An immensely engaging action game that truly innovates

words brady fiechter

One of the biggest surprise successes of the year, kill.switch is an action shooter that effectively steps away from the durable convention of the genre. All the basic, necessary components you'd expect in a military action title are superbly represented, but relying on the run-and-gun strategy you're most used to will lead to instant death. Other games have tried to slow the pace down a bit, forcing you to strategize with a more real-world instinct, but none have ever been able to do so with this level of intensity and keen sense of design.

Like any good shooter, particularly those framed in the first person, kill.switch constructs its settings out of ubiquitously placed safepoints, drawing you into corners, behind walls and overturned objects, forcing you to keep the enemy line of sight as blinded as possible. But where the general structure completely changes is in the way it forces you to stay covered to make the kill. If the situations presented in the game actually occurred in real life, the second you popped out of hiding to make a wanton pass with a happy trigger finger, an approaching soldier would immediately shoot you down. In kill.switch, you must meticulously assess every situation, locating enemy placement and deciding where to find a safe spot from which to make an effective kill. One or two shots and the enemy falls; essentially, the same goes for you if you're not incredibly careful. The pulled-back flow of the game is deliberate and uniquely engaging, and the satisfaction of the quick kills, the feeling of power in the midst of meticulously clearing out a firestorm, is just awesome at times. With a superb use of sound, the tension is that much greater.

This is a game about killing unrelenting swarms of enemy soldiers, feeding our adrenaline with the proper impact of a grenade, the deadly power behind a machine gun. There's no puzzles or exploration, points of getting lost or having to think too much. The story (Namco requested that all the details be left up to you to discover) sets up the levels and makes sense of the situation as well as it needs to, leaving nothing but challenging stretches of superbly staged action to pull us in. There's no reliance on prescripted events or sweeping cinematics to further compel us, which is just fine given the ability of the gameplay alone to work us over.

Violent enough without sinking in unnecessary gore, the effect of the mass destruction is immediate and assaulting; cool animations, interesting enemy movement and strong level design as engaging in skilled structure as pleasing looks all come together to play their important part. The star of the show is the tense patience involved in plowing through the exotic, globe-spanning kill.switch world—and what a gripping show it is. **B+**

"...kill.switch is an action shooter that effectively steps away from the durable convention of the genre."

You've got to constantly be aware of the situation, popping out for quick bursts of action.

Certain death at your
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12 o'clock

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Suggestive Themes
Violence

Microsoft game studios

Buckle up because Crimson Skies® is a deadly ride. Play single player as an air pirate at the helm of a tricked-out 1930s warplane. Because you're fueled by revenge, anyone foolish enough to enter your airspace is an enemy. Play on Xbox *Live*™ to pick a dogfight with up to 15 friends and strangers. Just remember, as you enjoy sending opponents into a fiery death spiral, someone probably has you in their crosshairs. Good luck, you are cleared to rule the skies.

CRIMSON SKIES
HIGH ROAD TO REVENGE

XBOX LIVE

XBOX

it's good to play together

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Castlevania
Lament of Innocence

words brady fiechter

system: playstation 2
developer: kce tokyo
publisher: konami
available: november

Purge your indelible memories of the masterpiece Castlevania: Symphony of the Night; this game just won't cut it if you're unfairly demanding a spiritual successor. And while you're at it, don't be tainted by the lingering odor of the two N64 Castlevanias, concerned that this might be another failed attempt to properly bring one of gaming's longest-running, most respected series into 3D. Take all your preconceptions and enjoy Castlevania: Lament of Innocence for exactly what it is—a bold success as an incendiary action game, brilliantly nuanced in its mechanics and full of atmospheric appeal. And it's also a fantastic version of Castlevania.

The game does not start out on the highest note. In the first of six major sections within the castle, level design feels mechanical and conveniently built for the sake of a strict action setup. The technical structure is immediately sound, but you feel like you're going through the motions—like you've been given something that just isn't a Castlevania. Once you locate the first boss, a mundane giant worm with squishy eyes popping out from holes in the ground, you feel a decent game in your hands, but certainly one of minor disappointment. But oh, how things change. As you begin to progress into immensely more engrossing sections of the castle, the spirit we've come to love in this series begins to take true form, lifted by another resonant, spirited electronic score by Symphony of the Night composer Michiru Yamane. The gameplay begins to bloom, the power of the theme builds its strength, and any initial residual scrutiny is absorbed by the finer points of this redirected interpretation of a Castlevania adventure.

The incessant combat is framed by a most familiar concept: creatures materialize from the ground and air, leaving no room unpopulated; doors lock until you eliminate the inhabitants, earning permission to plow onward to a boss and collect an orb. So marvelously honed is the action, so sensational the feel of whipping, dodging and

dancing around the enemy, unleashing those traditional Castlevania weapons like the ax and cross, that repetition translates to relentless engagement. It helps, too, that the wicked monsters are such a sight: the ghosts, with their haunting eyes and glowing lanterns; the hanged man, railroad spike through the skull and buzzing flies circling the shambling body; the giant, a towering ogre wielding a club the size of three of you.

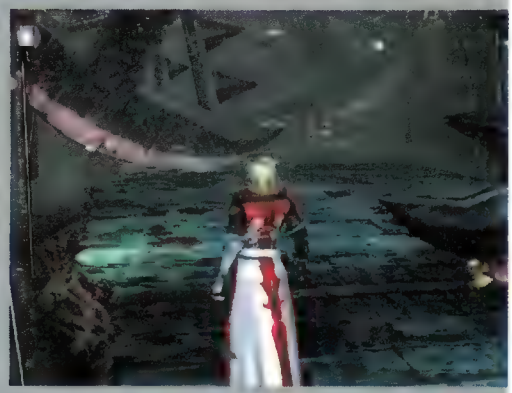
While certainly not the thrust of the gameplay, a proper assortment of environmental hazards has been placed to cut up the action. Avoid falling walls of spikes. Jump across crumbling walkways. Climb ledges and avoid skeletons firing electrical charges. A few creative diversions have also been thrown in, like the statues that must be destroyed by luring boulders that shower from an invisible ceiling.

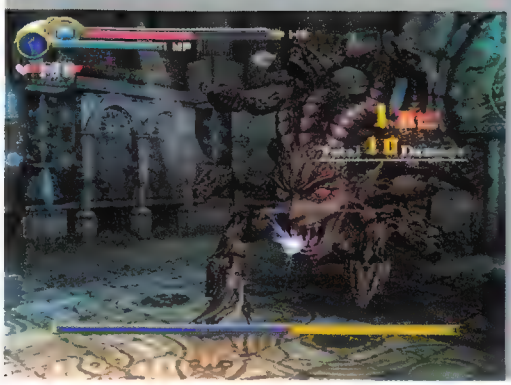
Director Koji "Iga" Igarashi and his team of heavy talents had a very specific game in mind, superbly crafting Lament of Innocence within that construct. Yet some of their design choices, I believe, limit the game's ability to truly soar. By placing a central hub in the front of the castle, where transport pads take you to the next section, that sense of completion and adventure that was captured so wonderfully in Symphony of the Night is missing. The role-playing elements, huge bounty of items to collect and experience points are also missed, and a reliance on more dynamic presentation would have been welcome—but that's not the angle Lament of Innocence was meant to take.

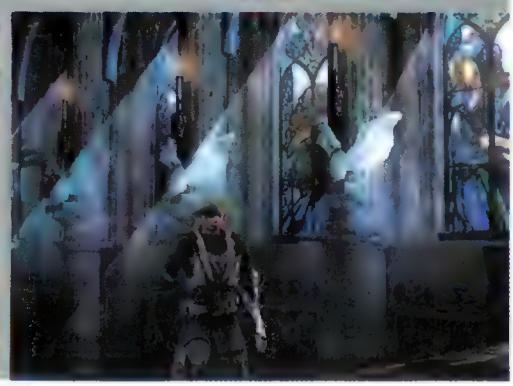
While there is a light story unfolding, it's so drivel-thin and badly acted, sinking in silly melodrama, that I gave up watching towards the end—the point of climax I was supposed to be most interested in. The story plays little part in the game anyway, so no matter, but it's not as easy to forgive such flaws when so many games offer a more skilled, robust package of story and presentation to join the gameplay.

My criticism comes, mostly, from imagining the triumphant possibilities a Castlevania adventure holds. This is not the game I expected, but given the traditional mold from which it was formed, it is of a high order. **B+**

"...a bold success as an incendiary action game, brilliantly nuanced in its mechanics and full of atmospheric appeal."







Star Wars

Rogue Squadron III

Rebel Strike

Factor 5 dip back into the Star Wars well. Will they come up dry?

system: gamecube
developer: factor 5
publisher: lucasarts
available: october

words michael hobbs

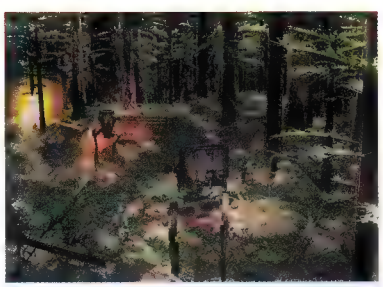
There is so much Star Wars goodness in this game, it's almost overwhelming. Full of spectacular set pieces pulled straight from the original films (plus a bit of *Episode II* for good measure), Factor 5 have certainly gone as far as they can go with this series on GameCube.

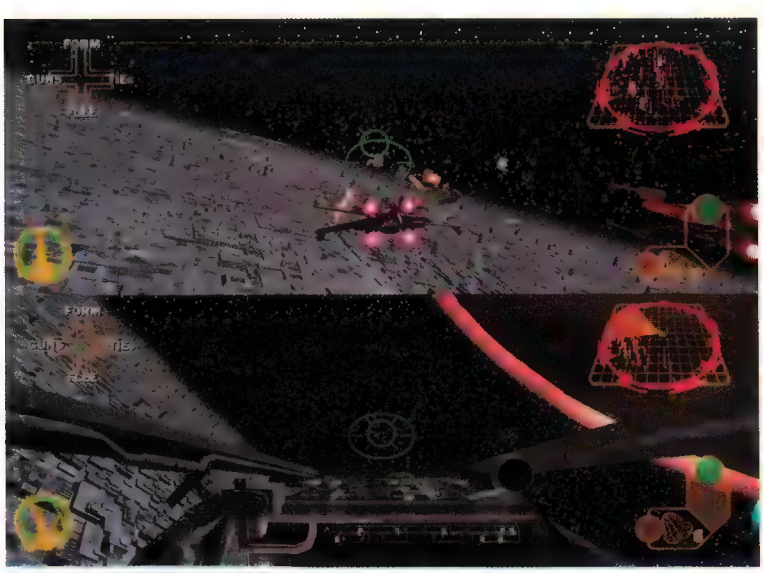
But first let's discuss this engine. Though far from perfect in terms of collision and frame rates, I absolutely love it. Normally, an engine that only occasionally shows me 60 frames per second will leave me disappointed and crying foul. But here, the sacrifice I feel is justified because of what you get in return, and that is an almost immaculate representation of the Star Wars universe. We saw this in Rogue Squadron, but this game is much more ambitious in its locations and on-screen density. Take special notice of the little details like self shadowing on the models that lends a great sense of volume to the various ships flying about. But what really impressed me was the modeling and lighting of the environments. One of the best examples is the forest of Endor, which is literally bursting at the seams with detail and great, thoughtful touches like moving tree canopy shadows that shift along the scenery.

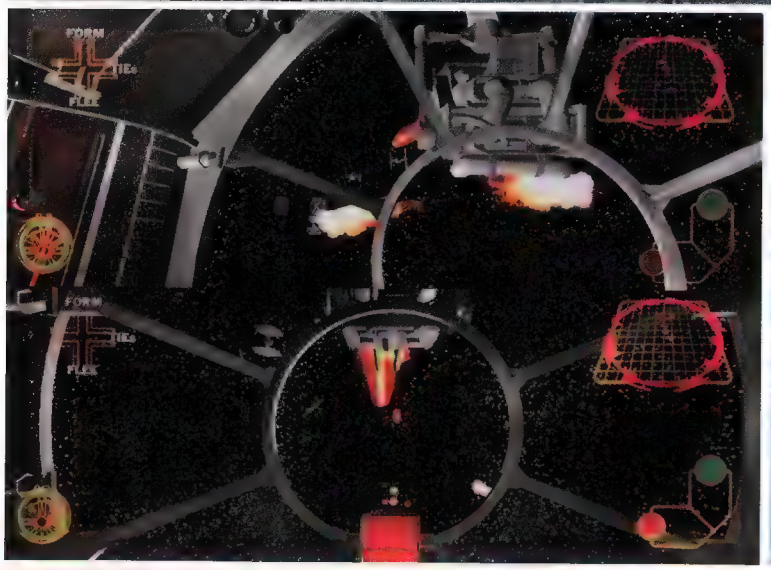
As ever, this would all be for naught without a fun and engaging game running on top of it, and Rebel Strike is just that. Of course, it helps to be a fan of *Star Wars*, for only then will you be able to truly appreciate some of the delightful missions that Factor 5 have dreamed up. Specifically, I'm talking about the levels which are pulled directly from the original films, complete with high-quality full-motion video that will make you long for the DVD release. Whether it's rescuing Princess Leia from the detention cell, piloting an AT-ST through the Battle of Endor (complete with Ewoks and rolling logs!), hopping around sand skiffs over the Sarlacc Pit or platforming on Dagobah, you will be floored by these special missions if the fires of nostalgia burn within you like they do me.

The other big talking point of this game is the inclusion of ground missions, and again, I turn a slightly blind eye to the sloppy control and sometimes frustrating camera because these missions look good and are fun, if only because you are running around blasting Stormtroopers like you pretended to as a kid.

If I were to rate this game purely on its merits as a game separate from its universe, I would probably give it a solid B. But I had so much fun with it that I have to bump that up a bit. I think it's fair to do so, because who else is going to play this game but fans of *Star Wars*? **A-**







This pure shooting sequence above is one of the many new missions inspired directly by the original films.

"Full of spectacular set pieces pulled straight from the original films...Factor 5 have certainly gone as far as they can go with this series on GameCube."

Beyond Good & Evil

system: ps2 (gc, xbox)
developer: ubi soft
publisher: ubi soft
available: october

Beyond what we've come to expect from a cinematic video game

words brady fiechter

Enriching and beautiful, elegant and towering with vivid imagination, Michel Ancel's Beyond Good & Evil is a triumph—an artistic, creative achievement to humble ordinary game design. It borrows respectfully from marvelous ideas before it, transforming the familiar into a newfound greatness, adding in its own magnificent brand of design.

The game doesn't fit neatly into any genre. Why even call it a game? We don't feel like we're interacting as much as absorbing the spirit of a story that would otherwise grow inside our thoughts. Where most games entertain us with cutscenes to observe, Beyond Good & Evil is a cutscene. This is the first game to fully, properly inject the undeniable power of cinematic technique into the experience. Forget the flaws; here is a bold first step in a new way of game design.

There is an intriguing war brewing in the land of Good and Evil, prompting aspiring journalist Jade to grab her camera and set out to cover the escalating mysteries surrounding the conflict. She is a gorgeous presence, a perfect balance of style and storybook hero, basic in her control yet infinitely commanding within the scope of her journey. Initially, she's joined by her uncle, Pey'j, but when events spiral out of hand, the bungling Double-H will enter the picture to join in the gameplay. No game has ever managed to so naturally integrate the team dynamic into completing tasks. There's no overwhelming complexity in what must be done. The inspired presentation makes everything seem far more engaging than it normally would be. The inhabitants seem to actually live in this world. We want them along for the ride, feel a greater sense of adventure and an uncommon spirit of camaraderie.

To purchase equipment for, say,

Get ready to sneak around a lot; these helmeted thugs are one of the many marvelous inhabitants you'll face.

"This is one of the first game to fully, properly inject the undeniable power of cinematic technique into the experience."

your watercraft—speeding across the remarkably rendered waterways is a blast—upgrade your items and weapons, maybe buy a few extra buckets of food for health and pearls that must be acquired for trade, profits are made by selling photos taken with Jade's camera. The photography aspect is a fantastic touch; we want to snap everything we see, further pulling us into the world and creating an unusual connection to its wondrous visions. How can you resist not snapping a shot of the dolphins dancing in the sun-drenched waters? The disgusting rats scampering in the crawl spaces? The giant worm peeking out of a hole in a cave in curiosity?

The camera is an integral part of the gameplay structure. Jade takes pictures of security panels and other devices, sending the information back to HQ for deciphering. The camera also serves as a frame for weapons, a puzzle-solving unit and other useful tools. Some of the most entertaining sequences require that you use it as a sniping device, like early on when patrolling guards must be shot in their breathing tanks, sending them ballooning up to the ceiling where they eventually explode. Every moment in this game, from the bosses to the enemies to the characters to the situations they all create, is a work of creative masters.

So fully immersed are we within Beyond Good & Evil's reality, we often forget there are mechanics behind what is going on. It never even occurred to me early on that you can't die during the ubiquitous platforming sections, with jumping handled as an automatic response. Because of the brilliant framing of the action, the tension created is beyond even some of the most challenging platformers. It's such a thrill watching everything unfold, and you are indeed in complete control of it all, if only your eyes tell you so.

Mention must be made of the fully orchestrated score and original music, embellished with song and voice. The imagery receives added life in a way we're used to experiencing in the best of cinema, and few video games have ever come close to reaching such an impact of hypnotic mood. The music is organic and impressively composed, playing with the visuals, not over them.

Beyond Good & Evil takes what we've come to expect from the finest video games and rearranges, fixes, refines, improves and shocks with uncommon ambition. Some OK voice acting here, unfortunate loading there and a little convention in between do little to detract from the overall experience. What an amazing game. A

Gladius

Barbarically yours

system: ps2, xbox
developer: lucasarts
publisher: lucasarts
available: october

words dave halverson

Assembling their gladiatorial epic, LucasArts has dug deep into the coffer of old in their bid to religiously portray the lore, the language, the nobility and the violence of gladiator tradition, crafting a convincing game where polygons must speak for what was once paid in flesh and bone.

As tactical RPGs go, I haven't found one since the Shining Force series and Dragon Force worthy of the hours they consume, but the drums of Gladius have resonated within. This is certainly among the pinnacles of the breed, offering a compelling universe, deep character management, commerce in league with the period, an engaging overworld, consuming battles and a soaring soundtrack.

The game covers a period after a great war that nearly decimated human kind in which the Affinity Gods and a mighty valkyrie united to vanquish a brutal Dark Lord, but not before untold minions were lost throughout the land of Gladius. During the uneasy peace that followed, the skills and brutality of combat lived on in gladiator schools throughout the region, which is where the game begins. Setting out to make a name for either Valens, the son of Imperia's greatest gladiator, recently murdered, or Ursula, the daughter of a barbarian king, and her brother Urlan, you'll compete in leagues at rival schools, recruiting allies, gaining fan support and forging your skills in the hope of reaching the High Tournament fought before the Emperor himself. Tis a gateway for an epic tale, fraught with character management that runs as deep as your sword's edge.

The battles in Gladius rely on both strategy and dexterity, as you align your characters in battle and ultimately strike via a running gauge, incorporating any number of button presses, depending on the move or spell you're casting. A combo, for instance, will require you to press two buttons in succession as they pass over colored segments in the bar; the closer to the red zone the better, while yellow depicts different degrees of accuracy, and blue a miss. A strike in the red zone not only scores the highest degree of damage but also garners crowd support, raising your popularity—one of many factors in the game's grand scheme.

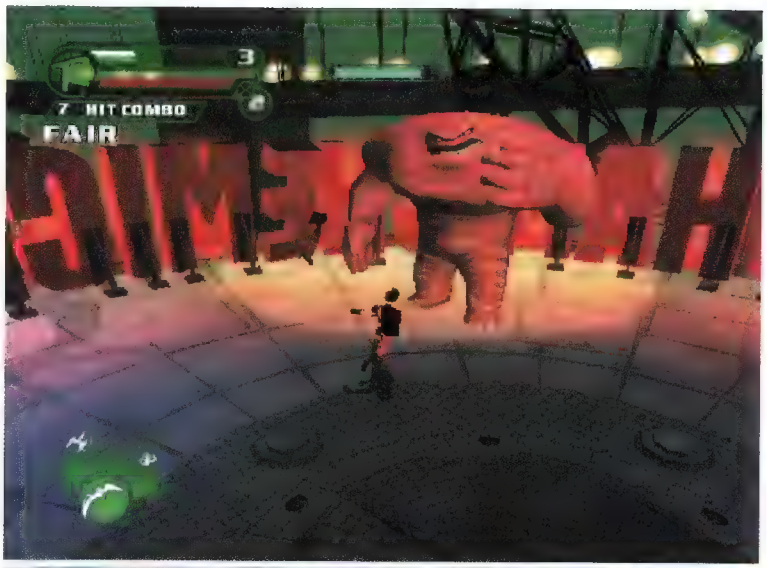
> **"I'm no authority on strategy-RPGs, but I know an engaging game when I play one..."**

Each school contains a diverse league where contests such as king of the hill, beast battle (you can also adopt beast forms), vandal battle, series elimination and rival nations, among others, earn you cups, up to the required amount needed to compete in the host's tournament. In between, it's all about managing your party and their skills, spending your hard-earned money on every conceivable upgrade specific to each character and their weapon type. There's a lot to learn in Gladius, especially early on, but it's presented in such a way that it goes from palatable to downright intriguing. You can and will get lost in this game if you have the slightest affinity for real-time strategy.

Graphically, I find the game suitable but somewhat wanting. The character designs are good (a bit tame for my taste, however), as are the diverse arenas you fight in, and I especially appreciate the overworld. Given the usual grid nature of these games, the ability to roam the countryside is much obliged. The models, however, although handily animated, could do with more detail, and it would be nice to leave marks and have running blood in battle. In the end, however, I suppose that given the amount of design afforded the player (you have dominion over how your characters look and dress), something had to give.

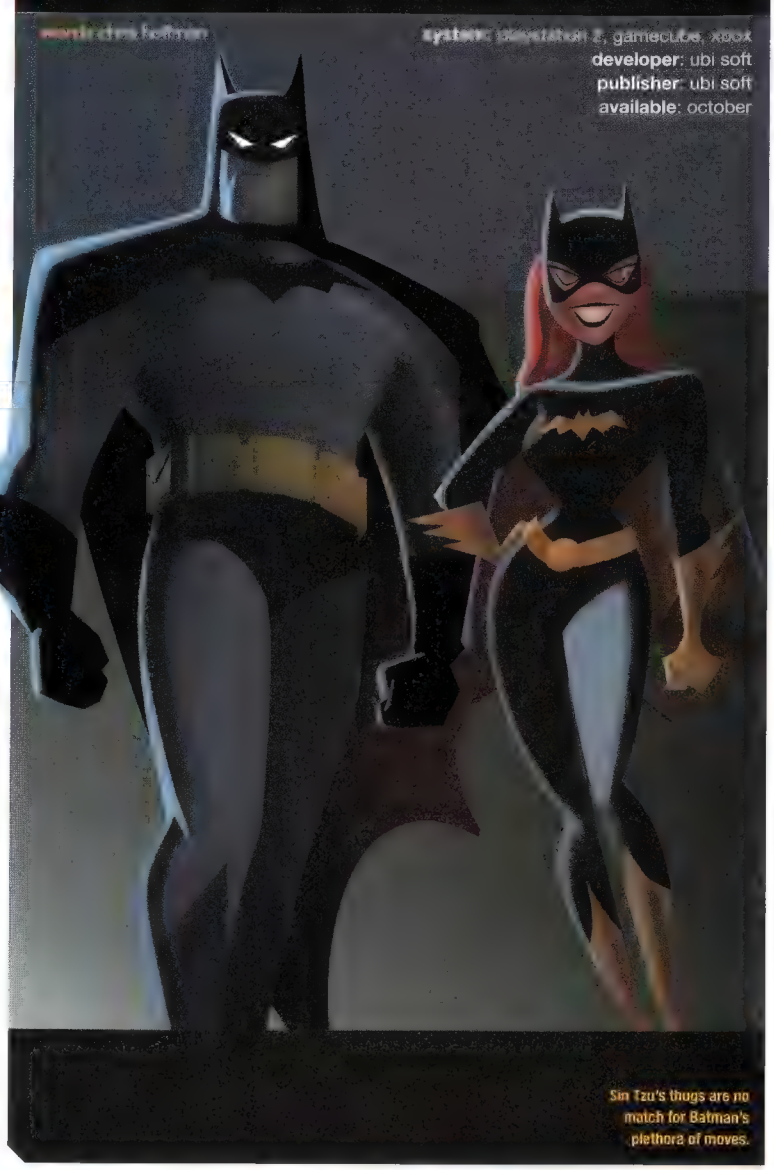
I'm no authority on strategy-RPGs, but I know an engaging game when I play one, and Gladius certainly rises to the occasion. There's an aura of nobility, barbarism and mysticism at work here that places you in the world and makes you care about the characters, and that's what it's all about. **B+**

Ursala's one tough chick. Come man or beast, she lays the smack down with equally bad intentions. You provide the skills; she'll provide the glory.



Batman
Rise of Sin Tzu
The Dark Knight returns...to respectable gaming

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: ubi soft
publisher: ubi soft
available: october



Sin Tzu's thugs are no match for Batman's plethora of moves.

There was once a time when Batman video games were great. Back during the heyday of 8- and 16-bit, when companies like Sunsoft and Konami had the license for the Dark Knight, Batman games were looked forward to, even celebrated. Since then, the license has become spoiled with titles that seemed more about exploitation of a marketable name than an enjoyable gameplay experience. So it's rather appropriate that Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu harks back to games of old as it tries—and to an extent succeeds—to give some respect back to the Caped Crusader's gaming endeavors.

Rise of Sin Tzu is a pure brawler in the vein of classic arcade greats; choose from Batman, Nightwing, Batgirl or Robin, then hit the streets and start busting up the slime of Gotham City with gadgets, fists and feet. Though the action is on the repetitive side, unique aspects help the game rise a notch above average: hostages must be saved and bombs need to be defused, keeping the action challenging and non-stop; environments are highly interactive; and loads of character-specific moves can be purchased in between levels, from combos to special attacks to throws to weapon upgrades.

A few problems decrease the fun of the fighting. The timing of the dial-up combos doesn't quite feel right, and the two-player co-op mode, though an excellent and necessary feature, is flawed in that it's all too easy to knock enemies off-screen where they can hit you but you can't hit them.

However, the game does succeed in capturing the look and feel of Batman. The visuals re-create Batman's animated exp' very well, with its stylized characters and cartoony yet gritty scenery, and the music hits the mark. Many of the cartoon's voice actors reprise their roles, and even the plot has been given special attention, with a script written by animation veteran Flint Dille (known for his work on *G.I. Joe*, among other things). Naturally, classic Batman villains serve as the bosses, and the new Sin Tzu character is a nice addition to the rogues' gallery. A ton of unlockables, including a fantastic making-of documentary, also await.

Overall, Batman: Rise of Sin Tzu is a decent outing for the type of game it is, and fans of beat-'em-ups should get a kick out of it. Batman is still a ways off from the level of quality he was at years ago, but it's a step in the right direction. **C+**

"Though the action is on the repetitive side, unique aspects help the game rise a notch above average..."

Crimson Skies

High Road to Revenge

Pulpy adventure meets air combat

system: xbox
developer: microsoft
publisher: microsoft
available: october

words brady fiechter

Crimson Skies was on the chopping block for a while, undergoing some major shifts in its design and focus a good way through its development cycle. The dedicated team must have been understandably frustrated with the direction things were going, but they kept plowing forward. The result of all the delays and hard work is an adventurous, high-spirited air-combat game that mixes campy fun with seriously intense action.

As a down-on-his luck air pirate named Nathan Zachary, your mission is to fly the extremely unfriendly skies of a pulpy, fantastical 1930s America, disarming localized threats for the reward of the bounty. With the Great Depression clamping down on commerce, many merchants take to the air in desperate search for success, threatened by the increasing population of pirates and bandits. Giant Zeppelins have become a major source of transport, lumbering menacingly through the clouds, heavily armed and not afraid to unleash their intimidating firepower.

The fun, swashbuckling story that plays out is a big part of the game's appeal, folded heavily into the flow of the gameplay, inspiring the missions that pop up all over this self-contained world. You start out on your adventure with the Devastator, an average plane at best, but earnings allow you to build a better plane or simply buy into something new. This isn't a game about complexity of control or unnecessary amounts of weapons and items to tinker with, relying on a perfectly tuned flight system of swift action and immediate immersion into the furious dogfighting. You basically have a primary form of a machine gun and some devastating missile-type attack, and often times you can enter other ships and mounted guns on the ground for concentrated firepower.

With its romantic look and spirit of old-fashioned adventure, Crimson Skies creates a setting that is truly original and a lively draw with its feel alone. The presentation may be a bit clunky and manufactured at times, but it all comes together for a complete experience that pulls you in the more you play. It's a kick resolving surprise twists in the story, finding a fantasy element that was handled surprisingly well; I wasn't expecting to fight things like a Zeppelin transforming into a giant mechanical spider.

The single-player experience was more than robust enough to keep me engaged, which makes the additional emphasis placed on multiplayer battles an admirable plus to Crimson Skies' already long list of positives. The structure of the game kept me far more interested in resolving the conflict alone, but if you like the idea of 16 planes going at in online, here you go: Dog Fight, Team Dog Fight, Capture the Flag, Wild Chicken, Keep Away and Team Keep Away. There really is nothing else out there like Crimson Skies. **B**

"There really is nothing else out there like Crimson Skies."

Often you have to pick apart huge airships, which don't go down easy.

Voodoo Vince

All sewn up and everywhere to go

words dave halverson

system: xbox
developer: beep industries
publisher: microsoft
available: now

Voodoo Vince isn't 40 hours long, there are no complex underlying systems at work, and you won't hear any hubbub about seamless this or groundbreaking that. It's not even an epic, really. What Voodoo Vince is—and the reason I love it so much—is the modern 3D equivalent of so many great games from the heyday of 8-, 16- and 32-bit, when fun ruled over length, and personality and feel over brand-name recognition. Back then, great original games always left you wanting more (of the same, thank you very much), paving the way for quick sequels and ultimately that elusive brand loyalty everyone is always chasing. For all of the convergence and licensing today, nothing hits home like an original idea successfully brought to fruition by a tight-knit team of skilled developers, and that's exactly what Vince is: born on a napkin, now ready to rock your world; he's just not real happy about it.

Vince has budding game star sewn all over him: he's loveable, mischievous, irreverent and cocky all at the same time. Just looking at the state of Vince makes me smile. A disgruntled voodoo doll brought to life by zombie dust, his initial reaction to being alive is displeasure over his lack of a winky, and when he obtains his first voodoo power, he just burps. Now that's entertainment. His quest to rescue his user, Madam Charmaine—a psychic friend who uses Vince, her "third-best voodoo doll," on occasion—will take him all over a Big Easy tainted and contorted by the effects of zombie dust (freshly airborne courtesy of Kosmo the Inscrutable's galoots, Jeb and Fingers)—the same dust that brought Vince to life before they tossed Madame Charmaine into the back of their truck.

Getting underway, a generous supply of double-jump-and-hover gameplay (oh, the joys of this most amusing act) set to one of the year's best soundtracks paint each twisted level anew as Vince—10 inches of highly flammable burlap on the edge—scours The Quarter, Roachfort, Crypt City, Brusque Manor, The Bayou and The Carnival. Size really doesn't matter when you've got self-mutilation on your side, but when he's not popping imps and zombies for their Mardi Gras beads (voodoo doll food), the emphasis shines brightly on Beep's oft-diabolical action puzzles (tweaked to utter perfection), nasty old-school bosses, and, for a change, lots of discovery, as Vince explores each wonderfully twisted world searching for Voodoo Icons (the tools for Vince's talent), Skull Pages (for a skull-tastic surprise) and Dust Bags to expand Vince's health meter. Before the deed is done, he'll ride a rat, fly a plane, drive a fanboat, pilot a submarine and, as they say, leave you begging for more.

Voodoo is fun! And Voodoo Vince is the coolest new mascot-type character to come down the pike since Sonic. Elsewhere, the bit players have cartoon series written all over them and the universe is ripe for any number of sequels or treatments. Beep Industries reminds me a lot of the old Shiny, circa Earthworm Jim. I only hope MGS seizes the opportunity in the wake of acquiring Rare, a deal I'm sure will pay off over the next decade, but Vince is their baby now—better raise him right.

It's infectious, fulfilling, and cheeky as all Hades, so enjoy the heck out of Vince, and then make some noise for a sequel. And don't let the freaky DVD case scare you (who is that on the cover anyway, his gay brother?). Chalk one up for those high dollar marketing firms! A small price to pay for one of the year's very best. A

"Vince has budding game star sewn all over him: he's loveable, mischievous, irreverent and cocky all at the same time."

Vince rains down some udderly nutritious voodoo.

Ratchet & Clank
Going Commando

Ratchet & Clank was a great game, and this sequel betters it

system: playstation 2
developer: insomniac games
publisher: sony
available: november

words brady fiechter

Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando is a wonderfully entertaining adventure—one of those rare treats that rises above what we've come to expect in a typical video game, of any genre, surprising us with bursts of originality and engaging us with classic sensibilities worked with such skill that we forget we're playing a game, fully immersed in the conflict of its world. It's populated with characters we actually begin to care about, and the story flows so simplistically well that we never feel like we're watching a movie as much as playing the main part. There's a playful joy to Going Commando, a blithe spirit of adventure that makes us smile while we're gritting our teeth through the endless stretches of brilliantly placed intensity.

Ratchet and Clank are back together again after previously saving the universe, setting out on another adventure to, well, save the universe. But things have changed. Their weapons are just so much cooler, their setting is just so much better designed and visually interesting, their tasks are so, so much more engaging to tackle, requiring all sorts of careful technique and trained advancement. Almost every one of the weapons serves a very distinct purpose, and you'll find yourself constantly deploying them all. The enemies are smart and aggressive, and while they do show a bit of over-scripting at times, the way they move and converge in a particular area make you feel like you're not just running into a random conflict point set up for the sake of a familiar gaming action scene.

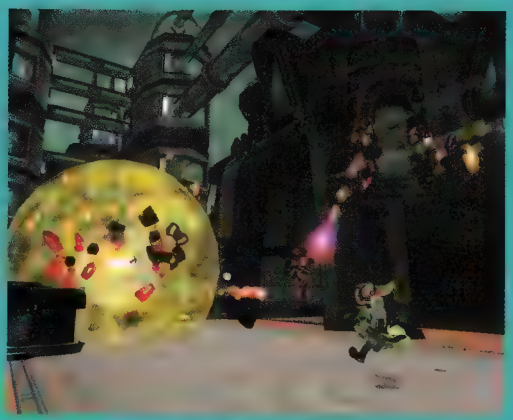
The core of the game is its action scenarios, but what makes Going Commando a more involving ride is its role-playing elements. Through the perils of battle, Ratchet is constantly building his experience gauge, beefing up not only his own abilities, but that of the weapons. Some of

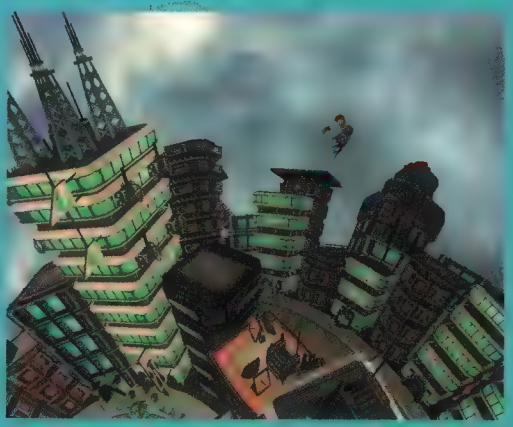
the items can even be retrofitted by paying an arms dealer, who is introduced through one of the game's many clever setups that come completely unexpected and keenly staged. Beyond the extraordinary level design, the story and its presentation bring the pieces of the universe you're traveling through together for an elegantly complete sense of belonging and structure; high praise to Insomniac for throwing in that desert crash scene.

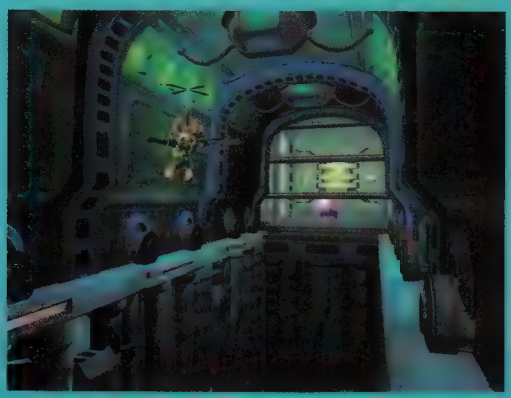
The gameplay path is fairly linear, and every time a minigame is introduced, it doesn't feel like a side diversion as much as yet another piece of the important puzzle towards resolving the events stacking up before you. Some of the sequences, like speed racing, space shootouts and gladiator arenas, are crazy fun and could stand on their own as a main game. And when Clank gets Iron-Giantized, dropped in a metropolis for a brutal battle with a towering mechanical fiend, you can't help but laugh out loud in delight.

This game manages to make you laugh a lot. Sometime it misses its note, and sure it's a bit silly, but the subtle effect the dialogue has on you is admirable; it helps that the voice acting is unrivaled. The support of the well-told story is so important, yet that's not at all what defines Going Commando. Without characterization and the fiction to impact the robust imagination of the world, it would remain a fantastic accomplishment—the mechanics behind the game are nearly flawless within the construct of what Insomniac was aiming for, with truly original puzzles and tons of creative platforming rounding the experience even more.

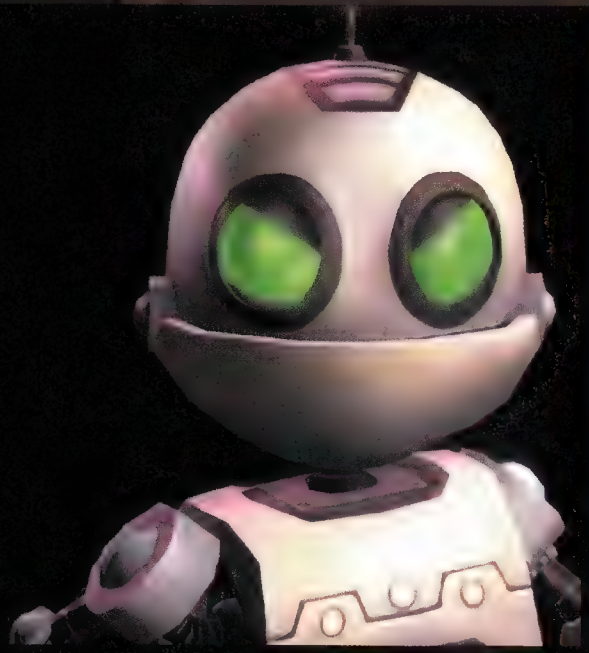
Insomniac could have very easily stuck to the basic structure of the original Ratchet & Clank, filling in a few of the staple sequel cracks with extra polish and extended good looks. Obviously they wanted something more, improving absolutely everything from before: I can't believe how much better the full, cinematic score is. There is a feeling of a love for the craft here—and, of course, it doesn't hurt that everything that's good and creative is just handled so well. Few games run on such a combination of distinct style, tremendous skill and effortless ambition.







The spherical worlds are an awesome addition, popping up throughout the adventure.



"...we never feel like we're watching a movie as much as playing the main part."

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon

A striking, if flawed, re-creation of the film

words chris hoffman

system: playstation 2
developer: lightweight (genki)
publisher: ubi soft
available: october

"The game also strongly emulates its source material, capturing the look, the sound, the atmosphere, the theme, the very soul of the movie in interactive form."

Ever since it was announced that Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon would be coming from the silver screen to gaming consoles the world over, one primary question has existed in my mind: is it possible to convert the majesty, elegance and wonder of the movie into video game form? I think the answer, remarkably, is "yes." But that alone does not make a great game.

Many aspects of CTHD work strongly in its favor. The beauty of Wudan martial arts as the core play mechanic, mixed with occasional platforming areas and an RPG-like character growth system, is a welcome combination. The game also strongly emulates its source material, capturing the look, the sound, the atmosphere, the theme, the very soul of the movie in interactive form. Featuring three main playable characters and thus three viewpoints from which the tale is told, CTHD re-creates the story and all the major events of the film—even the emotion remains. Some liberties were taken for the sake of good gaming; however, all but the most anal retentive should approve. The award-winning soundtrack is also taken straight from the movie, and the voiceovers remain pure with subtitles only.

Visually speaking, both armed and unarmed moves flow smoothly into one another, and special moves harness power and style. Controlling the moves, unfortunately, is a bit rigid, and directing attacks against multiple enemies is a challenge. Similarly, the combo blocking—which allows for an exquisite ballet of avoiding attacks—looks gorgeous, but results from mere button-mashing. A camera that becomes uncontrollable when it matters most doesn't help either.

Additionally, the game has a somewhat backward difficulty curve. CTHD's most unforgiving enemies are at the beginning, but as you advance, learning moves and building up stats, it gets progressively easier, with the exception of some boss fights. Early on, it's tough to simply enjoy the fighting or experiment with the variety of moves while dealing with seemingly endless waves of enemies.

Ultimately, I found that Crouching Tiger's gameplay didn't quite live up to the production values showcased by the rest of the game. For all its grace, CTHD is not as fun as it could have been, leaving the game best suited for those with high endurance who want to immerse themselves in the film. **C+**

Jen beats the stuffing out of Lo. That's one intense lovers' quarrel.

system: ps2, gc, xb
developer: bits studio ltd.
publisher: kemco
available: oct (xb), nov (ps2, gc)

Rogue Ops

Terrorists check in but they don't check out

words dave halverson

The once mighty Kemco, a veritable force back in the day, is set to emerge anew with a franchise player they can be proud of. If you've entertained the notion that Rogue Ops is merely a poor man's Splinter Cell attempting to cash in on a hot category by injecting a female lead, think again. Nikki Conner's first foray into gaming is every bit an original adventure handily cloaked in all things stealth. They don't get much more hardcore than this. From the coarse language to the real-time blood trails, Nikki begins where most stealth assassins end.

Truth be told, I'm not wild about the set-up, which has Nikki—an ex-Green Beret—out for revenge after her family is killed in a terrorist explosion. Whether it's just residual bad memories from Arnold's stinkiest role ever or the fact that a kid buys it, I do not know, much less care, since Nikki has obviously moved on. We join her at the tail end of her training with Omega 19, an anti-terrorist organization run by low poly-count drips that never blink. But fear not—those polygons are well-spent on Nikki, who looks and moves like a good heroine should.

On the physical side, Nikki's acrobatics are performed by pressing the action button, after positioning her for various grapples, ascents, jumps, etc., leaving you to concentrate on more important things, like livin'. The stealth in Rogue Ops is serious business, residing somewhere between Metal Gear and Splinter Cell in terms of mechanics, i.e., not at all passive. Nikki uses the cover of shadow and assorted super-gadgets, like x-ray and infra-red vision, to make her way quietly (when necessary) through increasingly messy objectives, but when force comes into play, she's duly equipped. Positioning Nikki undetected behind a mark, a gauge appears, followed by a series of directional arrows, your gateway to a crippling death-dealing combo. When detected, Nikki reacts the old fashioned way: shoot first and ask questions after she's hidden the body. Nikki has a realistic supply of guns 'n' ammo at her disposal that she can draw and fire at any time. While doing so is often not recommended, in a pinch she's a gas to control, picking off terrorist scum. What's cooler is that before she sends them back to Allah, she can pick their pockets, and then once they're off to virgin town, pick up the body and dump it out of sight. By doing so, drips of blood actually collect in your path (provided they're bleeding), ultimately forming a pool underneath the body, which will recollect should you move it—a bloody nice touch.

The not-so-nice feature of the game (depending on how you look at it) is how realistic it really is. Say, for instance, you've extinguished your health to all but a sliver around the last checkpoint in a mission. Should Nikki die, she'll start at that checkpoint with that same sliver of health, so you either have to play flawlessly to complete the mission or restart it knowing what lies in wait. Med-kits are sparse, and your intelligence, while always aware of your present location and situation, somewhat vague. They'll tell you where to go, but don't look for a big flashing point on the map. Things are less tricky on easy, but the normal and hard settings provide a formidable challenge for even the most savvy super-spy. Personally, I found the challenge quite welcome.

More sophisticated cut-scenes would have served the story better, which unfolds nicely otherwise, but I suppose they needed to leave something for the sequel, provided Nikki is here to stay. She's certainly got my vote. **B**

"The stealth in Rogue Ops is serious business, residing somewhere between Metal Gear and Splinter Cell..."

Something tells me his game is over...

SpongeBob SquarePants
Battle for Bikini Bottom

The best game featuring a talking sponge ever!

system: ps2, gc, xb
developer: heavy iron
publisher: thq
available: october

words dave halverson

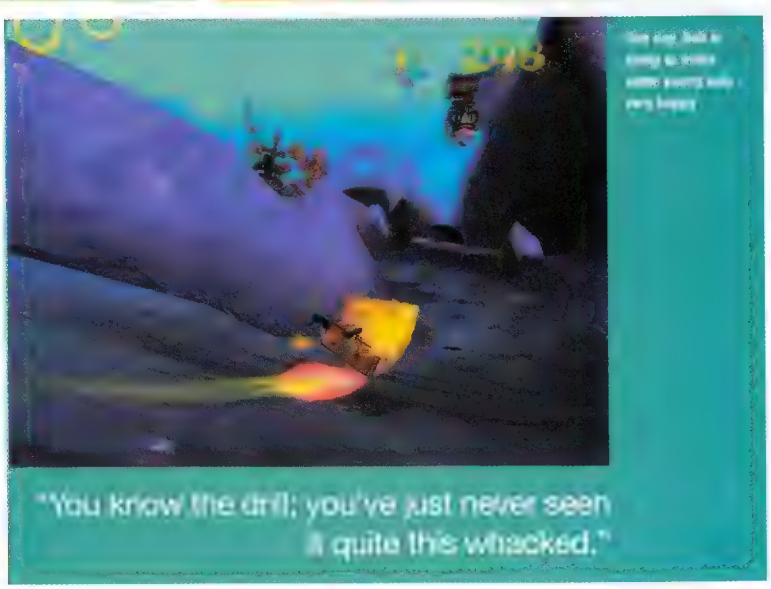
The reigning kings at turning pop-culture crossover fare into formidable video games, Heavy Iron, have to be one of the industry's most underrated developers. They've taken SpongeBob, another entity wedged somewhere between the kids and stoner-culture demographics (like Scooby Doo before it), and somehow transferred every inch of its absurdity into an ageless video game. I never knew collecting gold spatulas or "tongue boarding" could be so much fun.

From the bowels of The Churn Bucket they have come: Plankton's robo-army—astray from their regularly scheduled debauchery, stealing the Krabby Patty formula and thusly sending Bikini Bottom into chaos—to wreak all manner of havoc in and around Bikini Bottom. To foil their evil plan, SpongeBob and company (you'll also play as Sandy Cheeks and Patrick Star, hucking melons and acting like a dope) must partake in a massive hub-based platforming adventure of the Rare/Nintendo ilk, only written and performed (the entire cast is in on the action) with the same comic genius (if not insanity) expended on the show. Imagine that.

Literally every trademark platforming hook is in here: bungee (well, underwear bungee), the ever-popular Marble Madness bit, lasso-copter hovering, all manner of switch-throwing, every conceivable jumping mechanic and, of course, plenty of stuff to ride, like, er, your tongue. You know the drill; you've just never seen it quite this whacked.

As for translating Bikini Bottom into a gamescape—a tall order seeing as how it's flat and somewhat sparse—Heavy Iron has taken the necessary liberties to expound on the basic premise, as they did so successfully with Scooby Doo, to fashion a universe better than the source, while adhering to a buttery-smooth 60fps to boot. Heavy.

What really makes this one tick, though, is a level of creativity imbedded into each scenario that makes it impossible to put down, regardless of your maturity or lack thereof. As surreal as it is absurd, this is the kind of kid stuff that transcends age—either that or I'm simply regressing. At any rate, someone give these guys Invader Zim, stat. B



"You know the drill; you've just never seen it quite this whacked."

Virtual On Marz

Hitmaker takes Virtual On and makes it their own, for better or worse

system: playstation 2
developer: hitmaker
publisher: sega
available: october

words michael hobbs

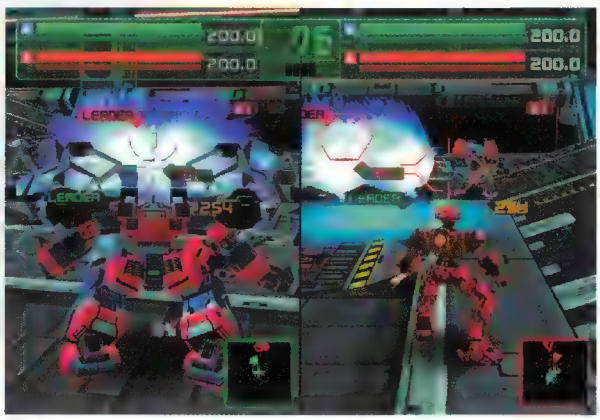
Virtual On has always been a game of rather singular appeal. You either love it or hate it. Bred and honed to perfection in arcades, this hardcore one-on-one mech fighter has come home three times, first on Saturn and PC, and then on Dreamcast with the sparkling port of Virtual On: Oratorio Tangram. But it's all change this time around as Virtual On lands on PlayStation 2 as Virtual On Marz.

Developed by Hitmaker, Virtual On Marz is based on the Japan-only arcade game, Virtual On Force. Among other things, this entry added team play, wherein two Virtuaroid mechs could battle as a team, with the goal being to defeat the other team's leader. Fans of the series balked, but new players found this a much easier game to play. Since almost no one outside of the U.S. has played Virtual On Force, Marz will be their first chance to sample this mode. As a lover of Virtual On, especially Oratorio Tangram, I found the team play diverting, but nowhere near as intense and focused as the classic one-on-one play.

But Marz is more than just a home version of Force with better graphics. An all-new, one-player Dramatic mode has been added, which attempts to surround the V-On play style with missions and story. Here you will face big boss battles and largish arenas to fight in, along with the occasional A.I. partner to help you out. I have to admit that I had fun with the missions, if only because I got a kick out of playing with V-On's very obtuse but ultimately effective control style in a different type of game scenario. There is a lot of stuff to unlock, and many difficulty levels to play through, but its appeal is purely a gimmick for players of V-On, and I doubt that anyone unfamiliar with the series will enjoy playing it.

If only Oratorio Tangram were tucked away somewhere in here! Oh well. Hardcore fans will probably be let down by Marz's lack of focus compared to previous entries, and newcomers will probably be put off by its initially very curious control style. Since I fall somewhere between casual fan and lover of the series, I found Marz to be an enjoyable experience, but not one that will truly please anyone. C+

"An all new, one-player Dramatic mode has been added, which attempts to surround the V-On play style with missions and story."



Tak and the Power of Juju

The next big little thing..with a stick

system: playstation 2, gamecube
developer: avalanche software
publisher: thq
available: october

words dave halverson

"When in doubt whip the stick out!" Tak beats a pesky Yorbel silly.

So he's impish, has the voice of a castrated Smurf, doesn't have a single muscle in his body, and spouts the lamest one-liners in video game history from the globally hated "who-duh-man?" and "boo-yah" to, of all things, "boom-shocka-locka" from NBA Jam (and the answer is no, nothing could be more asinine). He's still the quintessential bushwhacker of our time, working hard to overcome the persona so carelessly cast upon him in the best prehistoric romp since Bonk's Adventure.

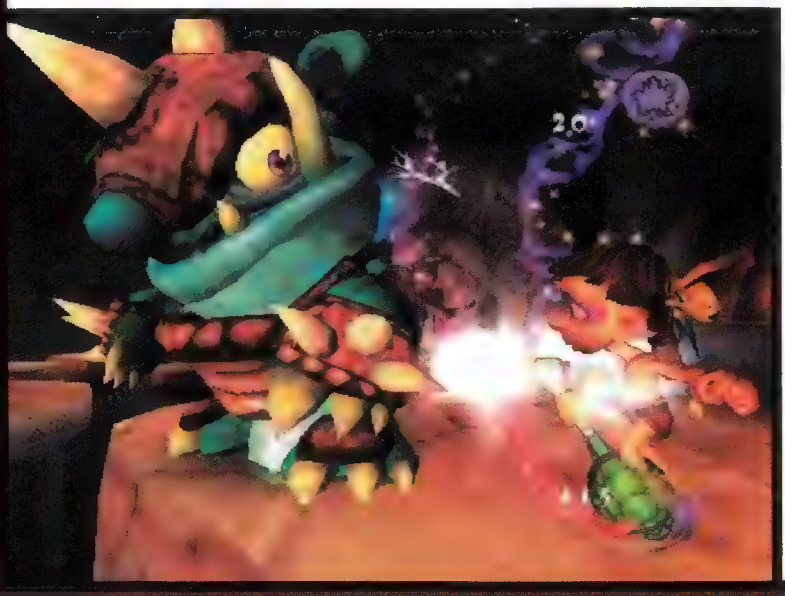
Your stint as a Juju—working your way through vast wilds to restore the Pupununu's protector (that'd be the Moon Juju) to power—will take you on a trek quite unlike any hub-based jungle-boogie in recent memory, doing things you've never done (incredibly enough) amidst vast wilds as lush as they are brimming with fine detail.

Sound too good to be true? Well, it sort of is. Aside from the witty quips that make you wanna stuff him up your car exhaust, you'll have to settle for 30 fps (sorry, no Xbox version here, although I can't understand why), and there's a kid quotient at work that skews well below the ardent platforming demographic, priming the pump for Tak's upcoming Nick debut. In the grand scheme, however, the game is so much fun and daffly humorous elsewhere, these count as minor distractions. Its just-squeezed freshness, epic feel and grand panoramas hearken back to those Rare games of old (well, not so old), and the cinemas are among the finest in all the land.

Tak is also one of the most detailed platformers I've ever seen, and possesses a measure of style that sets the universe apart, akin to what Michel Ancel accomplished with Rayman. When Tak uses a zipline, leaves fly from his hands; each individual banner and many of the plants have touch-sensitive physics; and Tak's feet leave pressure-sensitive impressions, not only kicking up particles particular to each surface but to the extent that if he's carrying mutton, the added weight will affect their mass. Waterfalls, geysers and the game's skies are all painstakingly detailed, and the wildlife throughout is vibrant, alive and involved—living play mechanics for Tak to manipulate.

Tak and the Power of Juju is a grand platformer, which makes the decision to inject it with the most grating persona since Awesome Possum all the more curious. But I've driven that point into the ground; it is what it is. These are indeed happy days for those of us who like to jump, swing, pound, scale, ascend, ride and place mutton on primitive mechanisms and beat them about the ass to make them work. Better to just sit back and enjoy it, I suppose. B+

"Your stint as a Juju will take you on a trek quite unlike any hub-based jungle-boogie in recent memory..."



Warhammer 40,000 Fire Warrior

The popular pen-and-paper RPG gets a decent FPS treatment

words brady fiechter

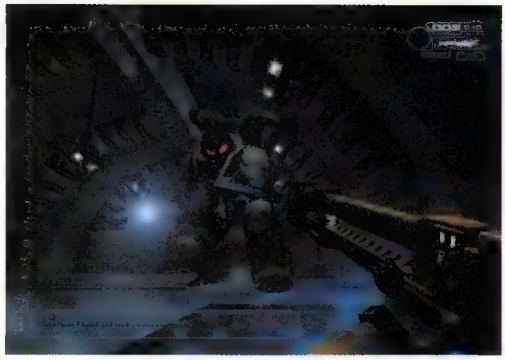
system: playstation 2
developer: kuju entertainment
publisher: thq
available: october

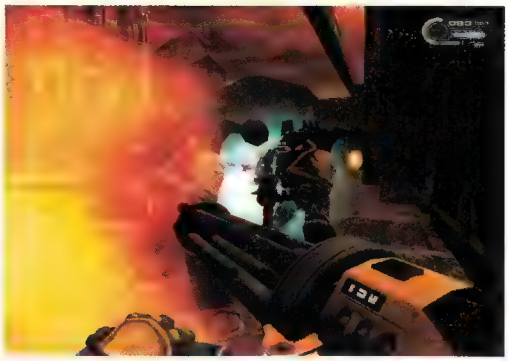
With all the military-styled first-person shooters reaching for the distinct emotion of a recognizable reality, Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior receives an added edge for filling the fantasy gap. Curiously borrowing from the dedicated pen-and-paper role-playing game that's inspired an array of comics, books and video games, this flawed but engaging game is traditional FPS action to its core, using the Warhammer universe to fastidious detail: characters and the broader points of the presentation underwent approval through original board-game creator Games Workshop.

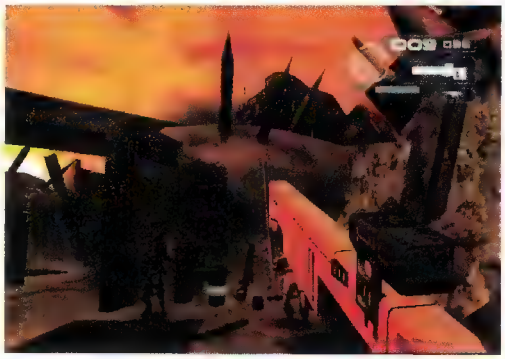
Followers of the Warhammer universe will certainly find this game that much better, but anyone who simply enjoys interesting designs and rich visual strokes will play immersed in the impressively constructed world. The artists and level designers have done a great job of creating a dusky place of atmospheric sci-fi, building in details that make the enormous areas seem to reach out in endless directions, encompassing us in a convincing reality. With an entertaining if typically banal story made less convincing by bad voice acting, the lengthy, apoplectic struggle remains consistently solid to the end.

There's no one area in Warhammer that goes much wrong, but outside the good looks that even offer a little wonder at times, the game is a bit uninspired in its basic design and gameplay path. Intensity in the action is never lacking, with waves of enemies providing an assaulting, relentless pitch of combat. Problem is, there's not enough strategic thought put into where the threat is coming from, forcing you into a path of endless running and gunning without a high-tier engagement of well-placed safe points and clever object interaction. Instead of fashioning smart enemies in exciting situations, the game unloads the chaos without restraint, and cheats by dropping health packs all over the place to compensate.

The action may get numbing at times, but Warhammer does enough right to make up for the weaker components. And while it's nothing progressively new, going online—it's the only PS2 FPS game this year with Network play—lends an added charge. **B-**







An impressive engine for PS2; the Warhammer influences will be especially appealing for fans.

"The artists and level designers have done a great job of creating a dusky place of atmospheric sci-fi."

Mario Kart
Double Dash!!

Mario Kart 64 on the GameCube

system: gamecube
developer: nintendo
publisher: nintendo
available: november

words brady fiechter

To everyone hopelessly addicted to the heated thrills and cheap spills of Mario Kart 64, here we go again. Mario Kart: Double Dash!! captures the love-it-or-hate-it Nintendo 64 kart-racing classic to the core. The look, feel, structure and incomparable Nintendo touch have been closely preserved, toyed with just enough to be labeled a substantial sequel.

All the charming Nintendo characters from the Mario universe are immediately selectable, from Mario, Luigi and Toad to Wario, Bowser and Yoshi, and they all posses a unique power-up to add to the familiar array of weapons contained in the gift boxes scattered about the courses. Victory requires constant weapon strategy as much as skilled racing; the balance between the two is perfect Mario Kart fun. Expect to scream when your opponent gets the nasty lightning bolt or blasts you last second with a red turtle shell. Yeah, it really sucks sometimes to unfairly lose your position and there are those cheap moments that leave you cursing your opponent's ability to sabotage what you just know was perfectly handled driving, but that's all part of the crazy fun; don't deny the pleasures of unleashing goodies like the new giant turtle shell, which mows down swaths of riders. This time around, the AI is a lot smarter and has a more engaging presence on the track, but the game has been purposely laid down in a way that exaggerates the tension. This isn't a physics-driven, meticulous driving sim. Double Dash!! creates its own rules and brand of racing, achieving a matchless fun factor.

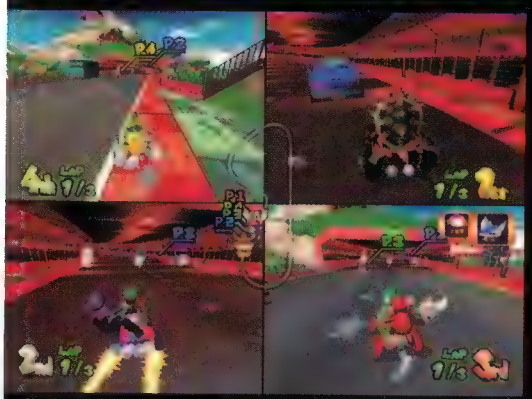
Course design varies from really good to spectacular. I especially liked the tracks directly inspired by Mario Kart 64. They've all been fashioned for the sake of swift, specific gameplay and multiplayer preservation, simplified yet spilling over with bright appeal. Environmental hazards are all over the place, heavily drawn from the playful Mario universe, like spinning Fire Bars, Piranha Plants, Pokeys and those nasty Chain Chomps. It simply wouldn't be this much fun without

Anyone who's grown up with Nintendo understands the charm of a Mario universe.

these added perils guaranteed to screw you over at the worst time.

First impressions thoroughly satisfy, but the more you play, the more you start to see how improved the game is from before. With the power of the hardware, subtle touches have been implemented in the physics of the karts, animations are delightful, and a newfound expansiveness to the courses makes it all the more engaging as you watch all the little karts move around in the distance, weapons bouncing about. The most substantial gameplay shift is in the team play, where you can switch riders back and forth to play off their distinct characteristics and horde specific weapons for just the right moment. The visual cues alone make it all seem more complex than it really is. More than anything else, the game just looks and feels so right in its grand simplicity.

After you've completed the challenge of the 150cc Grand Prix and gotten your fill of the initial 12 tracks, it's on to what Double Dash!! is all about: multiplayer madness. Grand Prix is a newfound blast with the buddy system—one guy rides, one guy launches weapons—and, of course, the battle modes, with two new additions, are hopelessly addictive. Given the falloff of the kart racer, it's likely anything will replace Mario Kart: Double Dash!! until the inevitable sequel.



"Double Dash!! creates its own rules and brand of racing, achieving a fun factor unlike anything out there."

Donkey Kong is a fine partner with his enormous banana.

SSX 3

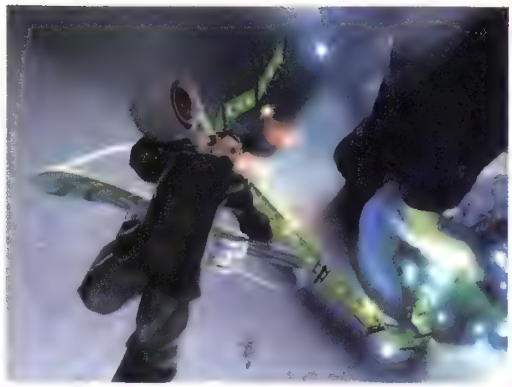
Elevating snowboarding to the clouds...literally

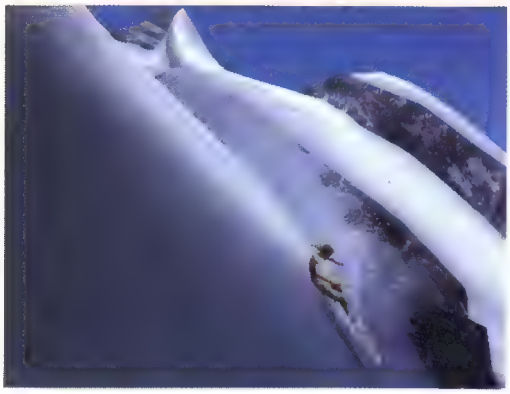
system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: ea canada
publisher: ea
available: october

Forget about SSX Tricky, the limp upgrade to one of the best first-generation PS2 games, a snowboarding classic that had as much flashy style as exhilarating gameplay. This newest installment in a series that looks like it's just getting started is the real deal in proper sequel-making, transplanting the basic framework of SSX into a dramatically restructured arena of expanded ideas.

SSX 3 is for people who don't like sports games, who normally wouldn't touch a snowboarding game, who just want to enjoy insane speeds and crazy gameplay. SSX 3 is for people who love sports games, who love heated competition and building up their characters and racing down a mountain with a genuine sensation of wild speed while performing sick stunts that could never be performed on a real slope. SSX 3 is for gamers who snowboard, intoxicated by the rush of the mountain, of feeling the packed snow under the board and the expanse of nature. It's a game that's just incredible fun, mixing in all sorts of gaming ideas with the thrill of the real sport, painting a final touch of extreme excess and color for scintillating effect.

When you first play the game, you'll notice a few changes in the control scheme, but the feel isn't so far removed from before that you have to relearn the process of making an impressive run down the mountain. There's just more of everything, with the trick moves receiving the most attention: newly added is the Uber trick combo system, offering all sorts of intense strings and wild maneuvers; rails are more integrated within the combos, allowing





"You play it the way you want, without having to resort to a specific style to dominate."

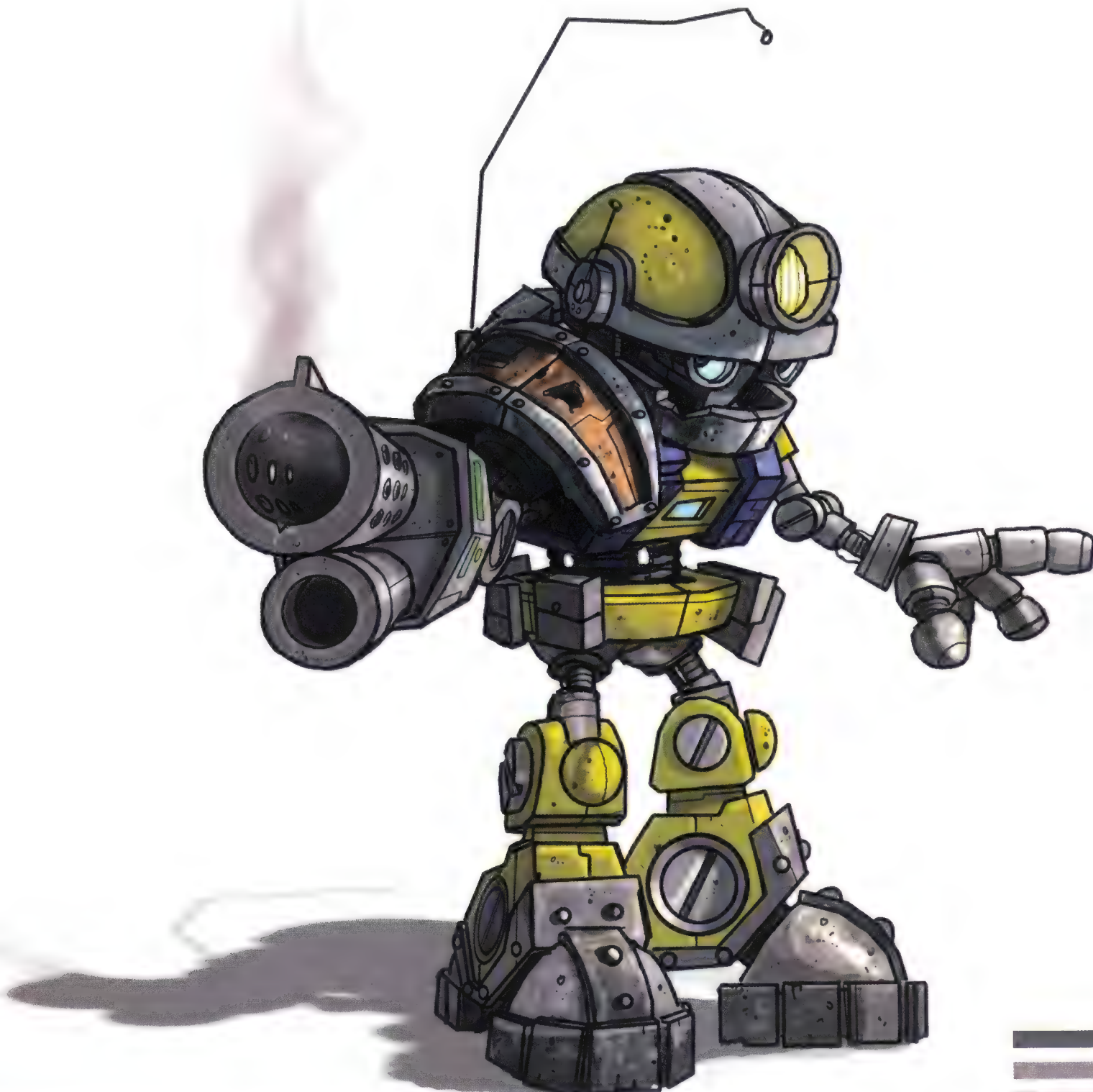
you to perform handplants and build far more involved chains. Instead of simply adding to your boost capabilities, the reward of your acrobatics is also monetary, opening the selection of new moves, upgraded equipment, new tunes and even lift tickets to different spots on the mountain.

I, for one, would rather race than perform stunts, which is perfectly fine within the game's construct and yet another point of its excellence. You play the game the way you want, without having to resort to a specific style to dominate. Because the three mountains are open to tons of events and races, there is no rigid track to follow. There's no front-end to the game, so getting to a specific point on the mountain requires that you board there, finding new sections of play as you become more skilled and heavier in the pocketbook. It's just so damn fun to go anywhere you want, and then come back after noticing a path you might be able to track down to reveal an entirely new area. The mountain feels much more alive; before you just picked your race and went.

There's a huge selection of characters to choose from, but this time out they all start with the same skill sets, varying only in appearance. As you build your boarder, you begin to see just how customizable the game is, finding all sorts of cool touches to play around with. This translates to the gameplay structure as well, creating an unusual level of involvement for this type of extreme sports title.

Normally, I balk at free-run areas, but SSX 3 is just so responsive and visually exciting that even tackling the mountain solo in areas like Slope Style never grows tiring—avoid an avalanche, skim snow-covered trees, drop through fog banks, defy gravity with monster air. With the added competition, being able to enjoy the thrill of seeing others tackle the stylistic beauty of the mountain around you, there's not an ounce of appeal lost after the thousandth run. Throw in the radio-style audio presentation with mixed music from the likes of Queens of the Stone Age, Fatboy Slim and X-Ecutioners, stacked to your liking, for even more immersion into this world of fantasy snowboarding. **A-**

Feel the powder under your board; the mix of fantasy and reality is awesome.



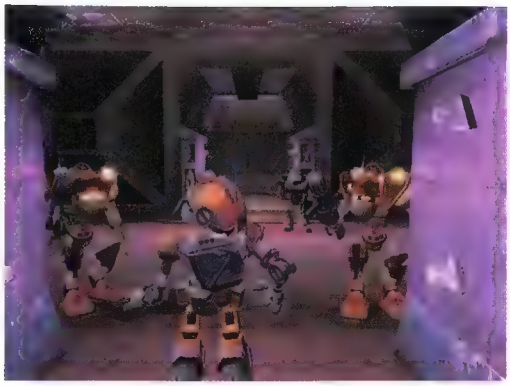
Metal Arms

Glitch In The System

This game has a Glitch in it

words dave halverson

system ps2, gc, xbox
developer swingin' ape
publisher vu games
available now



"With two faithful grunts by his side, Screwed and Hosed, Glitch sets out under the command of one Colonel Alloy..."

One question immediately springs to mind when playing Metal Arms: Glitch in the System: just who in the %$&# are Swingin' Ape, and how did they sneak the robotic equivalent of Halo under our noses? Pending our upcoming probe, for now you'll just have to believe me when I say that if you're into tactical action/shooters, this little slice of mech heaven should be at the top of your list.

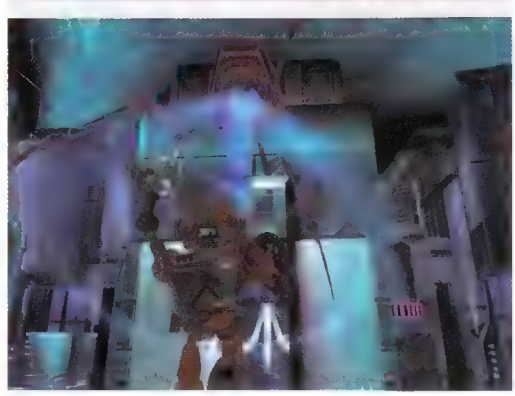
In case you hadn't guessed, you play the role of Glitch, a combat droid leading the charge to free the last bastion of droid civilization from the throngs of one General Corrosive, along with his legions of Milbots. Corrosive—the by-product of robo-experimentation gone horribly awry—has ground his makers into a creamy sauce and commandeered their manufacturing facilities to create his own militia of robot minions, enslaving droid-kind and disassembling all who dare oppose him.

Droid Town—the last stronghold of the droid rebellion—has come under attack, and Glitch, a strange prototype droid found ramshackle during a routine recon mission, has become droid-kind's last hope. With two faithful grunts by his side, Screwed and Hosed, Glitch sets out under the command of one Colonel Alloy (played by Rip Torn...either that or someone has violated the clone act) into a heavy-metal abyss doused with a level of humor in perfect cadence with the game.

Indubitably, it's an honor to be considered in the same light as Halo, and I wouldn't dare draw the comparison if it weren't at least somewhat founded. Metal Arms has a similar tactical feel—although it is much harder—and mission structure, along with assault vehicle sorties and the ability to commandeer enemy armament to deal a lethal dose of countermeasures. The difference, of course, is that Metal Arms is far less dramatic, more of a comedy epic. It's also third-person, veering from the first-person adventure path with the use of zip lines, platforming elements (double-jump generously included) and team warfare, as support pours in from droid command.

But be warned: the gameplay, in terms of difficulty, borders on brutal. The highly intelligent enemy attacks hard and fast and Glitch's ammo is limited. The game offers up a plentiful load of available weaponry, most of it upgradable, but munitions run out fast, and washers, the game's currency, are difficult to amass. Shady and Mr. Pockets, your friendly traveling arms dealers, are always close by, but they tend to charge outrageous prices. As a result, keeping your current weapons stocked, while saving enough to upgrade, becomes an exercise in level mastery. Recklessly spending ammo will cost you dearly in the early goings, and further on, a lack of full command over every move and nuance, as well as a keen lay of the land, will kill you dead.

Swingin' Ape make you work for every level, but what glorious levels they are. The detail spent on each and every droid is amazing, as are the physics applied, and the locales, from the underground tunnels to the ravaged cityscapes topside, are splendid. While the PS2 version (coded handily by Mass Media) isn't quite on par with the Xbox and GC games, it's a wonder in its own right. Nothing, however, deals textures like the Xbox, so if you're a multi-platform household, best to go for the green. **A-**



Kirby Air Ride

words

"You don't have to be lover of Nintendo-land to enjoy this simple but deceptively fun game."

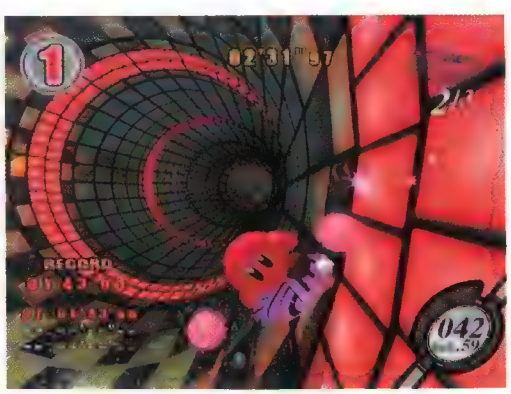
The Top Ride mode offers a short but chaotic race inspired by old-school overhead racers.

Considering that a Kirby racing game has been shown and talked about since the days before the launch of the Nintendo 64, this should be one the greatest racing games of all time if gestation periods are any indication of quality. Kirby Air Ride doesn't quite reach those heights, but it is a great and very addictive Nintendo-style racer.

Developed by Super Smash Brothers developers HAL Laboratory, Kirby Air Ride has the same sort of breezy greatness that typified that huge hit. Take the control scheme. This game uses only one button, and it's not even used to accelerate! As you move forward automatically, there is no need to hold a button down to go. Rather, the button has a few uses. One, it acts like a normal brake, slowing you down for sharp turns; this is where it gets interesting. While you are braking, a boost meter is also being filled, so that when you get out of the turn, you can release the brake for a speed boost. This basic element is so addictive that I am startled at its simplicity. It's so effective because it rewards you when you take a corner just right, imparting a sense of satisfaction that is normally only reserved for "real" racing games. The second use for the game's one button is the classic Kirby suck. When near enemies that are scattered throughout the courses, press the button to suck them in. If they have attributes like a sword, you will gain that ability temporarily, allowing you to hack away at nearby enemies and racers.

As a game, Kirby is divided into three distinct sections. First is the normal Air Ride, which is a standard race through the various tracks. Next is Top Ride, which is a really cool take on those great overhead arcade racers of yesteryear like Super Sprint. It's a great idea, but too chaotic for more than the occasional multiplayer go. Finally, there is the City Trial, which resembles something of an adventure mode. Here, you are given a short time to zip around a very basic-looking but event-filled city, collecting power-ups and trying different racing machines, building up to a contest at the end, which might be an all-out arena battle or a jumping, drag racing or other racing contest. Across all three modes there are tons and tons of secrets to unlock, just as there are in Super Smash Brothers, ranging from the mundane (sound test) to the desirous (new racing machine).

Kirby's aesthetic will certainly keep some people away, which is a shame. You don't have to be lover of Nintendo-land to enjoy this simple but deceptively fun game. The multiplayer is a blast and the challenge level is very, very high when the CPU is cranked up. This is one pink ball with a face that doesn't mess around. **B+**



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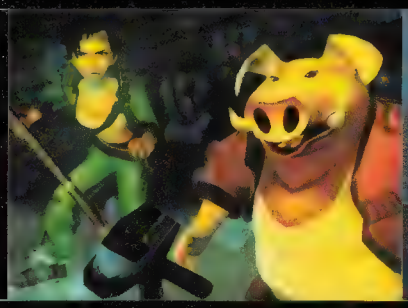


Game of the Month

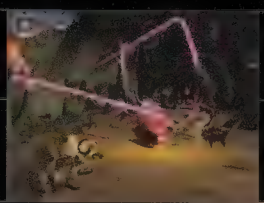
Beyond Good & Evil p.070

[illegible]

Also notice...

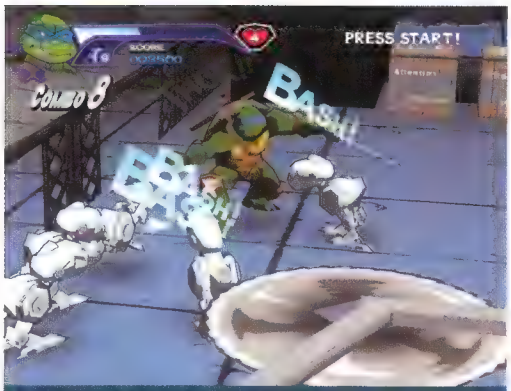
Mario Kart: Double Dash!!
p.084

Double Dash offers up more insane multiplayer fun, playing the perfect part of Mario Kart 64 sequel.



Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando
p.076

A triumph of action, adventure and even a little role-playing, this one bests the original by a wide margin.



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

system playstation 2, xbox, gamecube
developer konami
publisher konami
available october

words dave halverson

Based on the Fox 'toon, devoid of the extra cheese that made the rubber-suit films so glorious, TMNT is no less than an arcade-style turtle-de-force. Konami still knows how to rock the arcade, by letting the environments in on the action (exploding cars to wipe out gangs, fighting on semis...all of that old-school arcade goodness is in here) and blessing the turtles with precision control in league with mounting AI, consistently new, tougher enemies and outstanding bosses. The angles are fabulous—never staying in one place too long while framing the action with cinematic flair—the music tailor-made for the action, and the challenge formidable, with arcade-style back-to-the-beginning (of the stage, not the game) toughness. The arcade game to beat on console by a wide margin. **B+**

Leonardo DiCap-your-ass-rio. Nothing stands between a turtle and his pizza!

Bloody Roar 4

system playstation 2
developer eighting
publisher hudson/konami
available october

words chris hoffman

As always, Bloody Roar has managed to make its mark as a solid fighting game, if one that still lacks the incredible visuals, depth and appeal of the more famous one-on-one brawlers on the market. The modified Beastorize system—automatically transforming into beast form when your life bar runs out—does indeed make the fights more intense and enjoyable, and though it allows for sneaky come-from-behind victories, it works for you as often as against you. The game benefits greatly from the new characters, but the new career mode, unfortunately, is a major disappointment. Being able to upgrade your characters is fantastic, but instead of offering interesting challenges or match types to do this with, career mode presents a boring glut of one-round bouts. **B-**

EyeToy: Play

system playstation 2
developer london studio
publisher sony
available november

words chris hoffman

How much enjoyment you will get out of EyeToy's hand-waving, body-shaking gameplay correlates directly to how much you tolerate acting like a goof and how much of a social gamer you are. Personally, I had a blast. Though the load times are kind of long and there are a lot of layers of menus to navigate, the technology at work is fantastic. Taken by themselves, the 12 minigames and other features of EyeToy: Play are fun diversions, but they get old kind of quickly. However, if you have a group of friends, gamer or non-gamer, it makes an ideal party game. EyeToy: Play is a game that transcends age and gender, and if you're open to a different kind of gaming experience, one that is well worth checking out. **B**

RPG Maker 2

system playstation 2
developer enterbrain
publisher agetec
available october

words chris hoffman

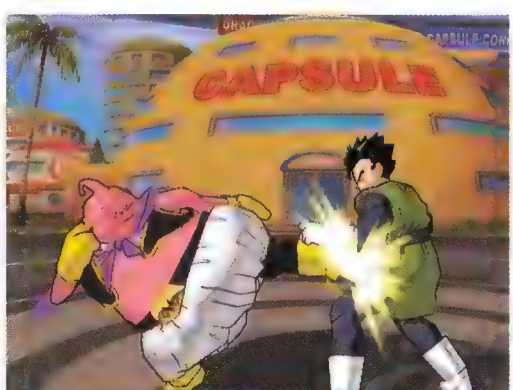
RPG Maker 2 is an absolute beast, one that will devour you whole, grind you up and spit you out if you're lured anywhere near its lair. To say the game is complicated is an understatement; most physics texts are easier to comprehend. Part of this is the game's fault—simple aspects like changing textures should have been configured better for ease of use—but the rest is due to its staggering depth. If you take the time to learn RPG Maker 2 inside and out, you will be rewarded with a set of amazing tools capable of designing detailed overworlds and charming cities, adjusting the camera, lighting, experience curve, character gender…you name it. Sadly, you can't create textures or models, but those who are able to tame this monster will still find an abundance to love. **B**

Lethal Skies II

system playstation 2
developer asmik ace
publisher sammy
available now

words chris hoffman

On one hand, Lethal Skies II is no Ace Combat. When a game can't carry the flight pants of a title that came out two years ago—not in look, not in feel, certainly not in over-all polish—it indicates that there's definitely room for improvement. On the other hand, Lethal Skies II still manages to provide fun for fans of arcade-style dogfighting. LSII has all the right pieces of the aerial-combat puzzle, even if they connect a little rough: lots of planes, lots of missions, varied level objectives over all manner of terrain. They even threw in some VTOL action (frustrating though it may be) and a two-player mode. True, there's nothing special at work here, but it more than gets the job done. It's worth giving a test flight if you're a fan of the genre. **B-**



Dragon Ball Z: Budokai

system gamecube
developer dimps/pyramid
publisher atari
available october

words chris hoffman

A port of last year's PlayStation 2 game, Dragon Ball Z: Budokai only exists to recreate the DBZ anime in interactive form. That's the area where the game is a success—it takes players through a huge portion of the DBZ story, featuring all the noteworthy characters and plot points. But as a fighting game, Budokai just doesn't make the grade. The action is so simple and basic that it makes Fatal Fury look like rocket science. Characters can't even jump or duck; special moves are few and combos are even fewer. The game is also severely lacking in modes; the story mode dictates what characters you use and offers far more story than action, and the simple tournament mode is incredibly short. Budokai has style, but the substance is almost non-existent. **C-**

Dynasty Warriors 4 Xtreme Legends

system playstation 2
developer omega force
publisher koei
available november

words michael hobbs

Most easily thought of as an expansion pack, this update provides some great enhancements that won't mean much to the newcomer, but will be greatly appreciated by hardcore fans. Though you don't need Dynasty Warriors 4 to play this game, you will need it if you want to enjoy Free and Musou modes in Xtreme Legends. As for the enhancements, they include much improved enemy A.I., level 11 weapons and all-new game modes, the best being the Xtreme mode, which allows you recruit your own army and purchase items at the end of the stage. Also new is the Legends mode, which features 42 (recycled) stages, but with different scenarios for each character. What hasn't changed, however, is the series' incredibly addictive and impressive-looking wall-to-wall action. **B+**

XGRA

system xbox
developer cambridge studios
publisher acclaim
available now

words dave halverson

Bike systems online; good afternoon, rider. After last month's PS2 review, I can honestly say that XGRA was made for the Xbox. Half of the initial frustration synching your brain with the flow of the game's accelerated pace goes out the window via the solid 60fps, and everything just looks, well, better, from the misty acid rain to the blinding dust storms. Cambridge Studios has intelligently integrated weapons systems, environmental factors, various race types and rival teams into their bleak future sport, creating a circuit that's as sticky as it is intoxicating, thanks to slick futuristic settings, throaty new two-stroke engines (in place of the old turbine hum) and the mesmerizing sounds of the incomparable BT. My PS2 grade was supposed to be a B-, making this here a B. Good luck out there, rider. **B**

Acclaim's big, bright, shining star of motor-sports just keeps on giving.

The Haunted Mansion

system playstation 2, xbox, gamecube
developer high voltage software
publisher tdk
available october

words chris hoffman

The scariest thing about The Haunted Mansion is how much it borrows from Luigi's Mansion. Sucking up ghosts? Check. Reluctant hero? Check. A healthy mix of puzzles and action? Double check. But where The Haunted Mansion falters is its inability to combine these features into a cohesive whole, in addition to mediocre graphics and somewhat awkward controls. The story is way overdone and weighs down the gameplay (and is not based on the upcoming Eddie Murphy flick, in case you're wondering), and convoluted specifics of progression are unnecessary given the game's linear structure. Although the puzzles range from good to great, they don't prevent the game from being average overall. **C**

Super Trucks Racing

system playstation 2
developer jack of all games
publisher xs games
available october

words dave halverson

Super Trucks is a good, if not great, idea, as there are enough F1 and sim-based racers out there to choke a donkey, making the idea of muscling around 1400 HP super trucks all the more appealing. Problem is that, given the mass of the vehicles, the effects weigh in on the sparse side, devoid of the level of silkiness we've come to expect thanks to games likes Gran Turismo and Gotham Racing. The game has its charms though; it's a gas to play—hand-break drifting is hugely entertaining and the cockpit view feels hella cool—and it carries the full regalia of the actual sport. Although the worst soundtrack of all time and less-than-stellar visuals conspire to keep it from reaching its full potential, ST is a fresh racer nevertheless: fun, mode-packed and above all, beefy, especially at 20 bucks. **B-**

Starsky & Hutch

system playstation 2, xbox, gamecube
developer minds eye productions
publisher gotham games
available now

words chris hoffman

Does the world really need a Starsky & Hutch video game? Regardless, we're getting it, complete with extra cheese and a double helping of funk. The driving and shooting action served up here is fun in its simplicity for a while, but my interest waned before I even finished the first of the game's three seasons. All the stages boil down to the same thing—chasing and a lot of shooting—and even when things are spiced up with variables like escort considerations, it's still pretty tedious. Co-op mode offers more enjoyment (if you can find a willing and competent partner), but sub-par character models, budget cutscenes and long load times don't help matters. So how about an A-Team game now? **C**

BloodRayne

Good to the last drop

developer: terminal reality
publisher: majesco
available: now

words dave [illegible]

Majesco's sexy drink of hybrid heaven, Agent BloodRayne, had a surprising allure on console, especially given that her game debut wasn't exactly [illegible] it was a good game, injected with some, shall we say, gratifying hooks (all hers), but not great. Regardless, it did very well, enough to green-light a big-money sequel (should Majesco choose to continue the bloodline) and land her a place among the vampiric elite on the silver screen. Bottom line: people like BloodRayne...they really, really like BloodRayne. And why not? She's sexy, only half bloodsucker (all the opening I need), and she really seems to love her work.

Her game debut—a shooting, platforming, bloodbath of an action-adventure bathed in ritualistic Nazi blasphemy and more blood draining than a season of ER—looked best on Xbox (followed by the GameCube and PS2), but it really shines on PC. With the bump mapping, dynamic shadows and water reflections switched on, it's a step beyond console, well worth investigating. Makes you wonder why they didn't bump map the Xbox game. I'm running a GeForce4 Ti 4400, 2.20 gigahertz, Intel Pentium 4 and had to download the latest driver to get it up to full speed, but it was well worth the effort, if for nothing more than seeing the rotted flesh of your would-be attackers bump mapped, glimmering in the moonlight. The game seems tighter too, and somewhat more polished, as it should—they certainly took their time making the jump to PC. You'll also find it easily configured to a controller if you so desire, although it takes nicely to keyboard and mouse due to Rayne's fairly straightforward approach of kill now and, well, screw the questions. To call her a heavy drinker would be an understatement.

Playing BloodRayne again made me [illegible] sequel as the more, once again reeling in the possibilities of this universe, and especially this character. Placed in a more polished gamescape, she undoubtedly has the goods to become one of gaming's most celebrated female leads—and I hear there's an opening. ■

Halo: Combat Evolved

Halo like you've never played it before

developer: gearbox software/bungie
publisher: microsoft
available: october

words tom ham

Halo: Combat Evolved has exceeded all of my expectations and cast aside all of my doubts. Gearbox and Bungie have pulled off a miracle of a game that is nothing short of brilliant. Not only is it a fitting tribute to a stellar Xbox game, but it takes multiplayer to a whole new level. This truly is combat evolved.

Thankfully, the single-player experience remains unchanged. Every conversation, every level, every nuance is the same as you assume the role of the Master Chief, fighting the many alien faces of the Covenant. Just playing through the familiar missions of Halo brought tears to my eyes.

What's different about Halo: Combat Evolved? Plenty. First, the obvious: graphics. The Xbox put out a visually stunning game, but there is something to say about high-resolution graphics on your PC. Gearbox have tweaked the Halo engine to perfection. Watching the game run at 1600X1200 left me speechless. Textures are incredibly rich; the lighting is to die for. The first time you see the shimmer on the Warthog, it will give you goosebumps. In addition, every player and alien model has been re-modeled to perfection. Control is another highlight. Bye-bye Xbox controller, hello mouse and keyboard. I'm sorry, I don't care what you say; playing a game like Halo is so much more satisfying and exciting with a mouse. If you really want to use a controller (or a joystick or steering wheel for that matter), the option is there.

On the flipside, however, in order to really enjoy Halo: Combat Evolved, you need a hardcore gaming rig to see any kind of smooth framerate. Even on our blazingly fast Dell XPS gaming system, the game still chugged at 1024X780 resolution. It's kind of a bummer—for a game that ran so well on the Xbox—having it run so choppy. But you look at the bright side: now you have an excuse to upgrade your current machine.

Repetitive level design is another sore spot in Halo: Combat Evolved. It would've been nice to see new textures and new alien models. But as they say, if it ain't broke...

The true star of the game is, without question, the multiplayer. Since the original Halo didn't have a multiplayer component, the developers have created the content from the ground up and it's quite impressive. There are two modes at play here: Standard and Classic. Standard is all of your basic multiplayer games like Deathmatch, CTF and Assault (there are 12 total); Classic is all of the Standard modes with different variables, such as time, score, etc. If you add them together, it comes to more than 38 different multiplayer game types. With over 19 maps and vehicles, you can bet the online mayhem is going to reach new heights.

The downside of multiplayer is no cooperative play—something that rocked in the Xbox version I was hoping would make it to PC—but alas, you can't have it all.

In the end, Halo: Combat Evolved is everything it promised and more. For fans of the original game, it's a no-brainer. For those of you new to the game, have a wonderful time.

Unreal Tournament 2004

preview

Taking Unrealism even further

developer: epic games/digital extremes
publisher: atari
available: november

words tom ham

I'll never forget the first time I played Unreal Tournament. Jumping off the helicopter onto a speeding train, followed by a full-blown assault with my bot teammates...one of the most exhilarating rides I've ever taken. The original Unreal Tournament was an in-your-face, high-paced first-person shooter that defined the very meaning of team play. Last year's Unreal Tournament 2003 did away with the tactical team-based combat, giving players unbelievable deathmatch gameplay and extraordinary graphics...and now 2004 is going to change everything. This is what I've been waiting for.

At first glance, one might think that Atari was just slapping the 2004 moniker on last year's game (with some new weapons and maps), but that's not the case. Epic Games have taken the core engine and gameplay of Unreal Tournament 2003 and improved upon it, adding better graphics, new weapons, new maps, two new gameplay modes and...vehicles. "Without a doubt, I'd have to say the addition of vehicles to the Unreal franchise is long overdue," explains Cliff Bleszinski, lead designer at Epic Games. "Nothing is more satisfying than blowing up your friend with a tank."

Classic game modes such as Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Domination and Capture the Flag are basically unchanged from before, however, Epic have added some small improvements to the gameplay. Players can now hold two assault rifles for some two-fisted action; the sniper rifle has been brought back from the original UT; and team colors are now reflected in the entire player model rather than just dinky shoulder lights. In addition, there will be 24 new character models, including new Skaarj alien models.

Another new feature is microphone support. Beyond what most online players are used to—voice-over IP where you can trash-talk to your heart's content—what's really cool is that players will now be able to control bots in the game via voice command—a first for a PC game.

While fans of the original UT will be drawn to the new Assault mode (where teams work together to achieve certain objectives), the new mode that impressed me most of all was Onslaught. Imagine rolling all the coolest bits of Battlefield: 1942, Halo and Unreal Tournament 2003 into one massive game mode. "Onslaught is so much fun," Bleszinski says. "It is a free-flowing combination of some of the elements seen in BF1942 and Planetside. The frantic tug-of-war gameplay to claim and defend power nodes makes for some highly enjoyable craziness."

Other areas of the game are equally impressive. From a visual standpoint, the Unreal Tournament engine never looked better. The models are actually sharper and more detailed than before.

My time with Unreal Tournament 2004, although short lived, left me yearning for more. Deathmatch fans that can't get enough frenetic first-person action are in for one hell of a ride come November.

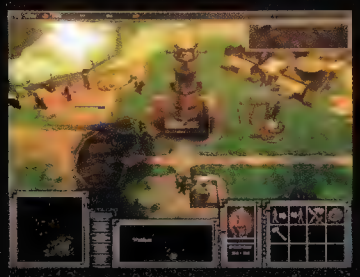
Savage: The Battle for Newerth

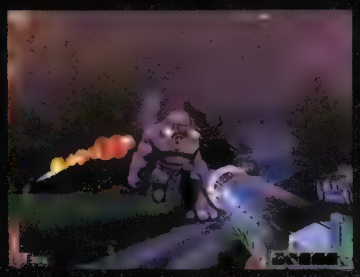
A successful blending of multiple genres

developer: s2 games
publisher: igames
available: now

words christina alexander

It's been said that we're headed towards a generation of games that cross so many genre-borders that they defy categorization attempts. Savage is one of those games. Blending the aspects of MMORPGs, RTS, FPS and a few sprinkles from other genres, Savage tries to create its own niche, and pulls it off with surprising adeptness. As a newbie in the land of Newerth, you'll have to choose a grunt-level character and work with a team, following someone else's orders until you gain the expertise to command your own troops. With experience comes gold, and with gold come upgrades for your character, mostly in the form of weapons and spells. The FPS portion of the gameplay hasn't been integrated well enough to please hardcore FPS fans who are used to the fluid animation and handy controls of games like Counter-Strike, but luckily that's not at all integral to the enjoyment of Savage. The true fun is in the teamwork aspect, where combined effort gets the job done. B





Runaway: A Road Adventure

An adventure of a different breed

developer: Tri-Synergy
publisher: Pendulo Studios
available: now

words christina alexander

Do you like solving puzzles? Do you secretly think of yourself as MacGuyver? Can you make a motorized raft out of an old tablecloth, some glue and three slices of ham? Then Runaway is your game. Depending more on intelligence and imagination, and less on manual dexterity, Runaway is much like the well-loved Monkey Island games. A young man named Brian is the protagonist, and he has managed to get himself mixed up with the mafia because of a pretty girl. Being Caucasian and kinda scrawny, with an unassuming personality, Brian prefers to think his way out of tough situations instead of resorting to violence. By borrowing, bartering and stealing items that look useful, and using them with your surroundings, you can keep Brian from being sent to sleep with the fishes. The environments are lushly vivid, featuring top-notch hand-drawn art, and the puzzles can be maddeningly complex, so if you're looking for a solid adventure title, Runaway is the way to go. B

Ghost Master

The ulitimate ghost hunter

developer: Sick Puppies
publisher: Empire Interactive
available: now

words christina alexander

Just going on premise alone, Ghost Master is one of the more unique PC titles to grace store shelves. While most ghostly games involve hunting down and banishing vengeful spirits, GM goes in the exact opposite direction. Instead of busting ghosts, your objective is to round up your ghoul pals and scare the living crap out of hapless groups of mortals.
Think of it as a demented sim game. As a ghost master, you have a select team of specialized haunters to carry out your orders. Some objectives involve simply finding out the deepest, darkest fears of the resident humans and getting them to flee in abject terror, while others may involve more complicated tasks. Choosing the right haunters for the job is imperative, as some may be better suited to indoor electrical appliance mischief while others work best outside controlling the elements. Keeping an eye on your ectoplasm levels, terrified humans, and enthusiastic ghost troops isn't easy, but watching a sorority house empty out faster than a theater showing Gigli is more than just a little fun and satisfying. B+

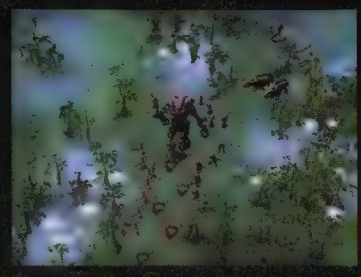
Age of Mythology: The Titans

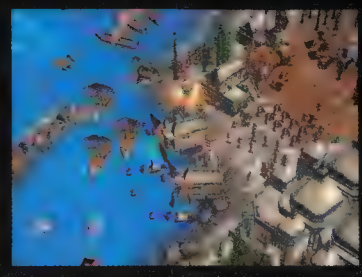
Delving deeper into the mythical lore of heroes and monsters

developer: ensemble studios
publisher:microsoft
available: now

words tom ham

Continuing to delve deeper into the mythical lore of legendary heroes and magical monsters, players are introduced to a new civilization this time around. Through Ensemble's masterful storytelling, players learn the triumphs and tragedies of the classic Atlantean mythology. With new units, weapons and structures, players engage in real-time combat that's truly mesmerizing. While the original game felt more like a run-of-the-mill RTS game (only with some cool units and God powers), Titans takes a more creative slant and the end result is legendary. Changes to the gameplay include the ability for any human unit to turn into a hero, the ability to use God powers more than once and, a big plus, having the ability to build town centers in the Archaic age. Not only has the technology tree been tweaked (so it's not as overwhelming as before), resource management is not the micro-management headache that it once was. But the true stars of the game are the titans themselves. Each of the four civilizations has their own unique titan. Just watching these lumbering giants in battle is plain awesome. A



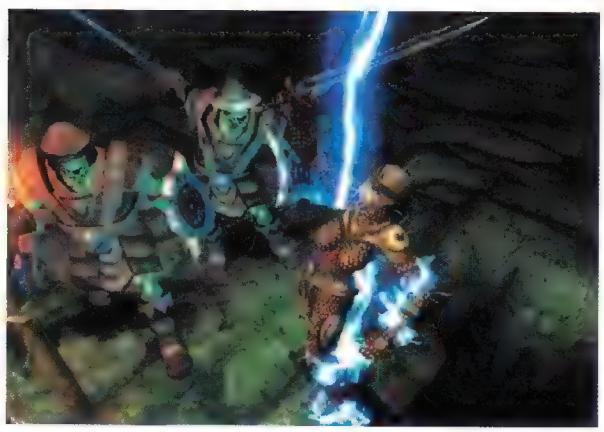


Champions of Norrath: Realms of Everquest

The creators of Baldur's Gate take their talents into the Everquest world

system: playstation 2
developer: snowblind
publisher: sony online entertainment
available: november

words brady fiechter



Assault rifles, rocket launchers and exploding flesh will no doubt continue to be a delightful source of online pleasures, but as Everquest and more recent addictions like Phantasy Star Online and FFXI have shown, the communal dynamic of adventure gaming can steal your soul with an alarming efficiency no straight action title can match. Any follower will tell you: there's nothing like the intoxication of drinking from the online role-playing challis. And console gamers are finally getting proper invitations to the party.

One of the most ambitious additions to this new online world is Champions of Norrath: Realms of Everquest. Created by the talent responsible for the fantastic and markedly similar action-adventure Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance, the game is being specifically designed to provide a richly engaging single-player journey, yet the ability to play alongside three friends, on- or offline, is exactly what this genre needs and, to this gamer, the most exciting feature of an otherwise enormous list of fantastic components.

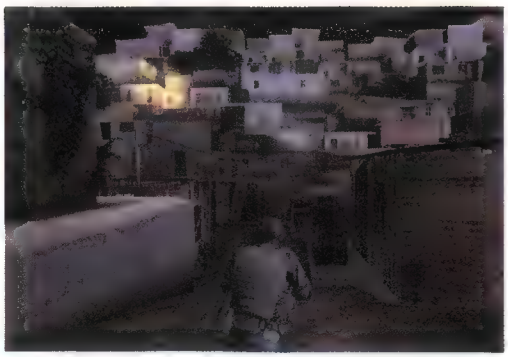
Set in the Everquest universe hundreds of years before the original adventure's conflict, Champions of Norrath takes you through richly atmospheric areas like the shadowy residence of the Dark Elves and the massive sinkhole of Kunark. With a more top-down view to soak in the expanse of the world, the game is focused on heavy action, with as many as 40 creatures onscreen at one time without compromising the loads of tiny details. A basic combat system doesn't deviate much from what you've become accustomed to in a dungeon-crawler, offering the most depth through magic and character customization. The role-playing elements aren't unnecessarily daunting, kept just involved enough to provide that proper, spirited feel of growing a dominant hero, chosen as either a female or male from five races: Erudite Wizard, Dark Elf Shadow Knight, Barbarian Warrior, High Elf Cleric, Wood Elf Ranger. Attributes are, of course, unique to each character you play, making the management of the unique spells, attacks and over 10,000 items all part of the fun. Your inventory will fill quickly, forcing you to sell back for even better armor and weapons, building the sense of wealth and discovery that is a big part of the game's appeal; there's just something so satisfying about cleaning out a dungeon and heading back to town to survey the bounty.

If early indications ring true, I don't doubt these 45 randomly generated areas branching off the central villages and towns will provide the 100 hours of gameplay the developers are hinting at. That's an insane amount of fighting and exploration, which is why the draw of the story is so important. Games like Baldur's Gate have gone light on story, but Champions of Norrath is detailing a much more intensive, broadly written narrative with much to discover. The presentation involves cinematic touches as well, weaving in more dynamic life to create a far more immersive world to exist in. Or, in this case, completely lose yourself in.

SOCOM U.S. Navy Seals II

Better than that movie with Charlie Sheen

system: playstation 2
developer: zipper interactive
publisher: sony online entertainment
words michael hobbs **available**: november



Just as we were going to press, an online beta version of SOCOM II drifted into the office. We'll be bringing you a full review next month, but for now, we thought we would share what we saw in this beta trial.

If you were a fan of SOCOM, then you are in for a real treat with SOCOM II. The list of new features and enhancements is too great to cover in this limited space, but these are some of the highlights. The most noticeable change is a graphical one. This game looks a lot better than the original. You'll see far more detail in the backgrounds and a much better lighting system. Receiving a similar upgrade is the music, which is a rousing symphonic affair. In terms of gameplay, two new gaming modes have been added (breach and escort), and there are 12 new maps to conquer. New small touches stand out as well, including an indicator over the player's head that is speaking and voice chat in the lobbies. Gear up for some sleepless nights!

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TEEN
T
Blood and Gore
Violence
Suggestive Themes
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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Sega GT Online

Sega's answer to Gran Turismo goes online

system: xbox
developer: wow entertainment
publisher: sega
available: fall

words michael hobbs

Of course Sega GT is a shameless copy of Gran Turismo, but that doesn't mean it's bad. In fact, it offers one of the best driving-simulator experiences, second only to you-know-what. But Sega GT has an early advantage over Gran Turismo 4's online ability, which we will get to sample this fall. In addition to the expected Xbox Live features like voice chat, Sega GT adds a lot over its predecessor, Sega GT 2002, to help make it a worthwhile online experience. Firstly, there are 40 new cars to unlock in this version, in addition to the original roster, and there are also new tracks. Online, you can race against up to 11 other competitors, and bet car parts and cars themselves against the other racers. This one element alone should be enough to ensure massive levels of addiction and involvement. How nice to be actually playing for something other than points!

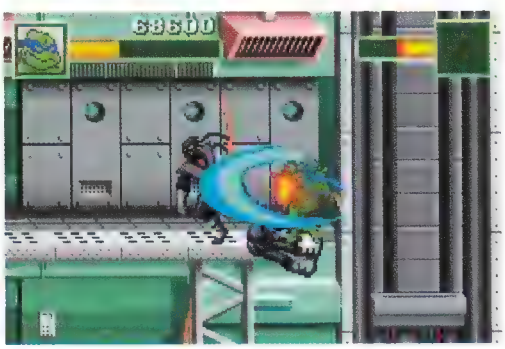
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Perhaps the Turtles' deepest game yet

words chris hoffman

Most TMNT games have been pure beat-'em-ups, but the Turtles' GBA title is taking a bit of a different path—and the results are awesome. Righteously fun side-scrolling fighting in Fall Of The Foot Clan style, complete with a plethora of combos and special moves, was expected—it's what the Turtles are all about—but platforming areas and slick vehicle stages (Don's hang-gliding shooter stage being my favorite) really enhance the experience. Each turtle has his own attacks and skills, plus his own unique set of stages, and it's all tied together with great looks and sounds that make TMNT feel like a really polished SNES game—not a bad thing at all from where I sit. I wish I could turn off the auto-run, but other than that, TMNT is an excellent offering. Personally, I like it better than its console cousin. B+

system: game boy advance
developer: kce studios
publisher: konami
available: october



Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge

Yeah, the name is silly, but the game is good

words chris hoffman

It's been an awfully long time coming, but it's safe to say that Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge was worth the wait. The fun and depth of the N64 titles have made it remarkably well to the Game Boy Advance, complete with some sizable worlds, challenging platforming and loads of collectibles and sub-quests, only without the backtracking and camera problems of its console predecessors. Every level offers new challenges and new abilities, so the quest continues evolving and new areas are continuously unlocked. Still images don't do the game justice; the animation is great. Character designs and sound effects, however, are trademark Rare ridiculous. Nonetheless, fully featured platformer/adventures aren't especially common on the GBA, making BK a rare treat (no pun intended). B+

system: game boy advance
developer: rare
publisher: thq
available: now

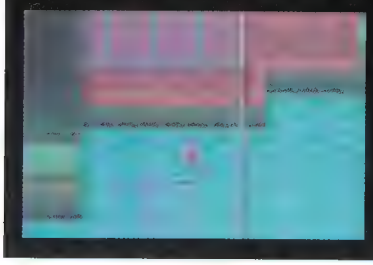
Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee

Going from Xbox to GBA, something had to give

words chris hoffman

I have to give credit to the developers for cramming so much into the GBA version of Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee. Given the scope of the Xbox game, it's an unenviable task, but somehow they've managed to pack in the pair of leading characters, their varying powers, interwoven paths, and even their vocal interactions with NPCs (aka Gamespeak). Clearly, the GBA is up to the task of such a game, conceptually speaking. The technical side, though, is something else entirely. Though the seamless integration of action, puzzles and even a tad of platforming is pulled off well, the package it's presented in is rather unappealing. Graphic details are lost in a drab palette—characters would be indiscernible if I hadn't already witnessed their proper realization on console—and repetitious audio is better turned off. The controls are also stiff, sometimes unresponsive, and overly complex. If you're able to look past all that, you'll enjoy the intricacies of the puzzles, the fun of controlling foolish guards and manipulating machines, but it's a bit of a hill to overcome. C+

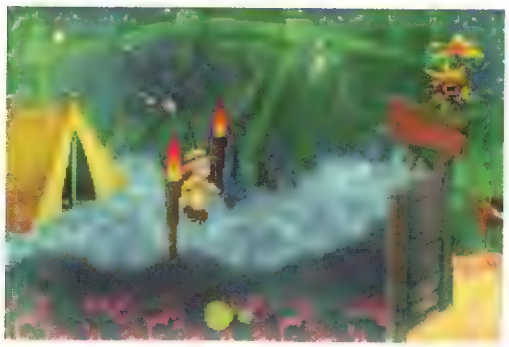
system: game boy advance
developer: art
publisher: thq
available: now

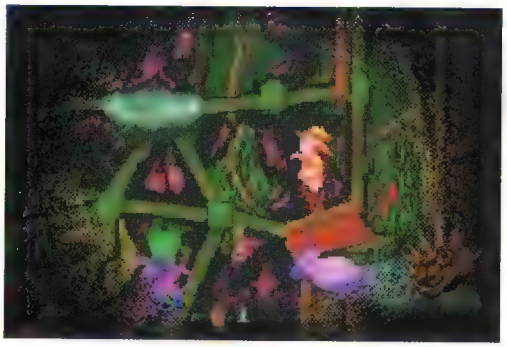


Sabre Wulf

Only wits and reflexes can stop the savage beast

words chris hoffman





Equal parts platforming and strategy, Sabre Wulf is arcade action for the thinking gamer. This revival from nearly two decades ago is a title whose charms are not immediately apparent, but subtly draws you in with its gameplay, building to the point where you're critically analyzing each obstacle to determine the best way to overcome it. Your skills are dually challenged, first by the use of animal power-ups that cleverly offer ways to conquer enemies and avoid obstacles—the main character has no offense of his own—and secondly by outmaneuvering and outsmarting the titular 'Wulf as you escape each stage with his treasure. The ability to purchase animal aides prevents the challenge from becoming overwhelming, but if it's difficulty you're after, beating each stage in record time and thus unlocking the Challenge Mode, where you have severely limited time and resources, is not for the easily frustrated. Sabre Wulf is highly pleasing graphically, and the British humor entertains, but once again, Rare's penchant for annoying sound effects rears its ugly head. Still, this thoughtful title offers a fun reprieve for those willing to venture off the beaten path. B

system: game boy advance
developer: rare
publisher: thq
available: february 2004

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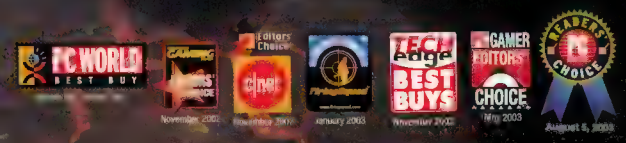

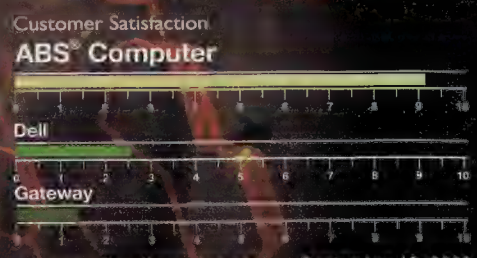

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ESPN NBA Basketball

system: ps2, xbox
developer: visual concepts
publisher: sega sports
available: now

"...it's almost like a fighting game—who will execute the proper move first?"

words tom ham

Sega fouled out last year with their NBA 2K3 game. It had a great Dynasty mode and it looked pretty, but the lack of innovation made it sub-par against EA's Live. For 2004, Sega has a whole new look and a new game to boot. Not only have they sped up the gameplay (thank God), the developers have created a whole new way to control your player. Although it's not as polished as NBA Live 2004, it's nice to see the franchise is back on track.

Just like in football and hockey, Sega has dropped the 2K moniker. The game is now simply called ESPN NBA Basketball. Totally taking advantage of the exclusive license, players are treated to great ESPN presentation—complete with picture-in-picture, signage and great studio commentary.

What's hot this year? A spanking new career mode called 24/7. After creating a player from the ground up (body, head, hair color, tattoos, clothing, etc.), you will take him and go through various training exercises to improve his skills. Then take your player around the world and compete in various competitions from 1-on-1 to Dunk-Offs, where the better you do, the more your skills will increase. I have to hand it to Sega: this is an extremely ambitious way to go, and the kicker is they pulled it off.

The lack of any sort of "freestyle" control in last year's game was definitely a major shortcoming, so for 2004 Sega is introducing something completely new. Iso-Motion control (Iso stands for isolation) utilizes the right analog stick (or a sequence of button presses) where players can execute an offensive move and then add on to it. Players can execute moves like spins, crossovers, step back moves and hesitations. On defense, players will be able to react to every offensive move, whether it is blocking passing lanes or double-teaming up on someone. So when you face a player, it's almost like a fighting game: who will execute the proper move first? Of course, factors come into play like who the player is, timing, position and type of move. If the defender counteracts quickly enough, he'll be able to take the ball away. Although it's certainly not as fluid (or easy) as EA's or 989's Freestyle control, surprisingly, it works.

Visually, Sega has turned it up a notch. The player animations are a lot smoother than last year's game and, from the looks of things, all of the players and arenas have gotten a total facelift. Players are a lot more detailed (the faces are really great-looking) and new clothing physics just make the game that much more realistic. I just wish they fixed the camera angles on the PS2 version (how come I can't zoom in?).

Other nice features include online play for both PS2 and Xbox, a very deep franchise mode and, of course, Sega's signature Street Ball.

NBA Shootout 2004

system: ps2
developer: 989 sports
publisher: 989 sports
available: now

"Now the whole world can see if you really suck."

words tom ham

989 Sports showed they could hang with the big boys with NFL GameDay 2004, and their latest basketball game has come to play as well. Last year's dismal effort is all but a distant memory as NBA Shootout 2004 breaks new ground in graphics, gameplay and online features.

Back again is 989's fantastic signature Career Mode. Here, players start off in the Summer Pro League. After doing your time and learning the necessary skills, you can then try to make it to the National Basketball Development League, and if all goes well there, you might get signed by the NBA. Since players have to earn their place, you need to show some consistency in practice and games against the other benchwarmers. It's all very cool.

Taking the Career mode a step further, 989 is allowing players to track their progress online. This is a cool way for players to see how they're doing compared to other players across the country. In Online Career Mode, it will track all of your stats, records, successes and failures. Now the whole world can see if you really suck.

Gameplay is tighter and much more refined. AI teammates will spread the floor just like in the real NBA. Defensive players will close gaps, intercept passes and double team key players. Centers will takeover the middle to prevent the drive to the basket. Not only can you use the new QuickPlays for on-the-fly offensive and defensive call outs, but you can also use your voice to call out plays as well. Pretty slick.

The one area that has improved tenfold is the visuals. Running at a smooth 60 fps, the players and arenas never looked better. New dribble animations, crossover moves—I can't get over how much better this game looks than last year's game.

Players of NBA Shootout 2004 also have access to 989SportsOnline, a sports community where players can chat live, exchange messages, set up tournaments (up to 64 players) and check out their standings and stats. People can even log on with their PC to check out the information. The real time sports ticker during your games is also a nice touch.

NBA Live 2004

system: ps2, xbox, gc
developer: ea vancouver
publisher: ea sports
available: now

"For 2004, EA have done it again... NBA Live 2004 is a slam dunk."

words tom ham

Last year, NBA Live 2003 was my pick for best basketball game. The top-notch graphics combined with the brilliant Freestyle control made for some of the most exciting basketball gameplay ever seen in a video game. For 2004, EA has done it again, implementing expanded Freestyle control, improved defensive AI, superior graphics and a brand-new announce team. Without question, NBA Live 2004 is a slam dunk.

NBA Live 2004 is all about battles in the trenches. Players can forget about running up the middle every time for the easy lay in or dunk. The AI has been tweaked to react quicker to the open lane. So now players will step out and bump you and stop your advance. Other improvements to the defense include being able to block dunks and layups from behind, snatching alley-oops from the air and stealing passes mid-flight. Tipped passes are more of a variable now since the AI will anticipate the pass and try to force the turnover.

Another major change to NBA Live is the offensive control scheme. Now instead of just one button for all shots, there are two—one to control layups/dunks and the other for outside shots. In previous games, when a player would shoot, it would take into account several factors, mainly who was shooting the ball, where he was in relation to the basket and how many defenders were around him. Since Live 2004 is all about defense, players now have to strategically decide which type of shot to use and when to use it. A major downside to Live 2004 is the lack of offensive boards. Your players get rebounds now and then, but for the most part they just stand there and let the defense scoop up the ball.

Visually, no other basketball game can touch NBA Live 2004. Since the game has new defensive and offensive moves, additional animations had to be created. Just watching Kobe change his shot from a layup to dunk in one fluid motion brought tears to my eyes. The arenas have been reworked as well. Players are treated to dynamic crowd animations, banners on the rafters, retired jerseys and referees.

Rounding out NBA Live 2004 is a robust Dynasty Mode, One on One, Practice, a spectacular two-man announce team (Marv Albert and Mike Fratello) and, of course, EA Sports Online Competition. Looking for the best basketball game? NBA Live 2004 is nothing but net. A

NBA Jam 2004

system: ps2, xbox
developer: acclaim studios austin
publisher: acclaim entertainment
available: now

"Acclaim jumps back in the game with a totally revamped NBA Jam."

words tom ham

Having lost their respect on the court to the unstoppable NBA Street, Acclaim jumps back in the game with a totally revamped NBA Jam. Shifting to three vs. three gameplay, Jam 2004 showcases cool ball-handling moves, crisp animations and, of course, bad-ass dunks. As you win games in the new tournament mode, you'll earn Jam Points that can be used to unlock a boatload of options such as classic uniforms, arenas and cheats. The new Legends Tournament allows players to hit the parquet with classic NBA players such as Dr. J and Larry Bird (sorry, no Jordan). Sadly, the game isn't perfect. For starters, the AI could've been more challenging—I was able to break it down fairly easily and score at will. Although it's fun as hell to play with a friend sitting next to you, an online multiplayer mode would've also been nice. B-

SmackDown!
Here Comes The Pain
Improving an already excellent series

system: playstation 2
developer: yuke's
publisher: thq
available: october

"...some of the best character models ever seen on PlayStation 2, bar none."

words chris hoffman

When it comes to SmackDown, THQ doesn't seem to believe in the phrase, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Even though last year's version was arguably the best wrestling title on current consoles, THQ and Yuke's have made a number of changes to their tried-and-true formula, making WWE SmackDown! Here Comes The Pain more than just an annual update.

"Every year, once we finish a game, we really look at it and decide from a nonbiased perspective what areas can we really improve and what areas are not performing at a high level like other major titles out there," says Cory Ledesma, associate producer. "We never really think we have the A+ title. We're always trying to reach that level. We just keep shooting for that star."

The most significant change is to the grapple system. Instead of executing moves directly from the ready position, the wrestlers now enter into actual grapple animations. There are actually four distinct grapples per character (depending on the direction pressed when you hit the grapple button), from each of which four moves can be executed. The result is more moves and more control over which moves to use. Only rear grapples retain the traditional SmackDown mechanics. Additionally, both the reversal and submission systems have been refined to be more competitive.

While last year's SmackDown was no slouch in the graphics department, Yuke's has managed to do some amazing things with HCTP. Characters like Brock Lesnar and Steve Austin are ridiculously detailed, right down to the tattoos—some of the best character models ever seen on PlayStation 2, bar none.

"We were able to increase the poly count for the models this year, so that's the big difference," Ledesma notes. "Also, these modelers have been working on these guys for about five years now so they really have them down. They know their features; they're really in-tune with what they look like. We spent a lot of time on getting the accuracy down."

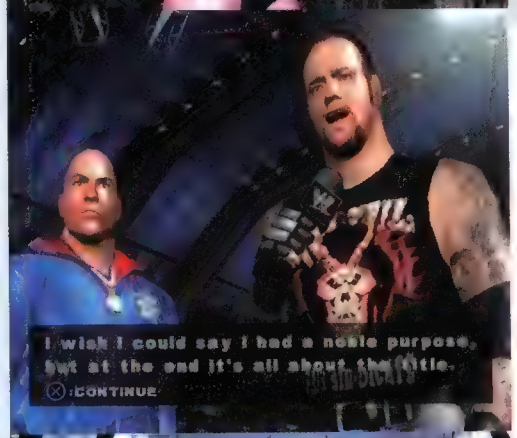
Other lower-tier stars haven't received the same attention, but they still look excellent. And fans of the WWE divas are sure to be in heaven.

Many other changes have also been implemented. Characters now have individual stats and differing weights that affect gameplay. "When you step into the ring with Brock Lesnar versus Stevie Richards, you're gonna destroy Stevie Richards," explains Ledesma. "He's not gonna be able to counter anything, his damage is gonna go up real quick and...he'll be a lot easier to pin."

Additionally, the story mode has been given more depth as well as a streamlined interface, new match types have been added, including the six-man Elimination Chamber and a Bra & Panties match, and the character roster has been updated with new faces as well as legends from the past like Sgt. Slaughter and Ted DiBiase.

"Legends are really in the game because we wanted to add a compelling unlockable," Ledesma says. "This has also been a fan request for a while. It really kind of started with old-school Undertaker. We started looking at our first roster and saying 'Hey, you know, some of these guys have been here a long time. They are legends.'"

Although some sacrifices have been made—there's no color commentary in the game—Here Comes The Pain is shaping up to be almost everything that a wrestling-game fan could want. THQ just might hit that star yet.



Pay your respects to unlockable legends like Sgt. Slaughter, Jimmy Snuka and The Legion of Doom...and that's an order, maggot!

WWE Raw 2

system: xbox
developer: anchor
publisher: thq
available: now

"Non-wrestling fans need not apply."

words chris hoffman

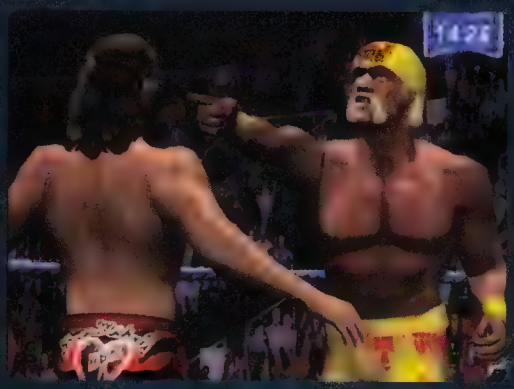
WWE Raw 2 is a game that does a lot of things right but few of them exceptionally. Although the game is vastly superior to its predecessor, this truism is rooted in the basics of the play mechanics and permeates throughout virtually every aspect of the game.

The gameplay engine of Raw 2 is nothing if not solid. The grappling system is intuitive and flexible, and offers up enjoyable Aki-inspired fun. It's held back, however, by a slow pace, iffy reversal system and limited moves. Likewise, the season mode has a lot of good ideas—run-ins, call-outs, surprise attacks, offers of support—that are hard to utilize. Littered with extraneous cutscenes and lacking a story to move it along, season mode comes off woefully unpolished.

Also, while Raw 2's character models are nearly impeccable on their own, they don't look quite right compared to the actual wrestlers. All the characters have a cartoony look to them, and few of the faces look like the people they're supposed to represent.

One area of Raw 2 that's hard to fault is the character roster. It's a bit out of date, yet it's extremely satisfying to see the big stars, such as Hulk Hogan and Brock Lesnar, next to guys like Jamie Noble and Shannon Moore, who weren't even included in other WWE games. The custom character mode is also bursting with options. It's certainly not as deep as SmackDown's, since you can't edit facial features or layer clothing, but creating custom entrance videos and ripping music tracks is just awesome.

Though I had fun with WWE Raw 2, to be honest, I think that had a lot more to do with it containing a number of good ideas rather than it actually being a great game. Non-wrestling fans need not apply.

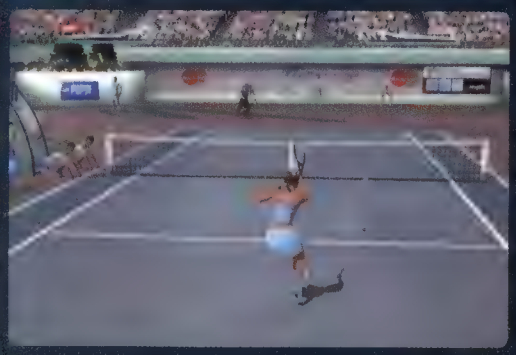


Top Spin

system: xbox
developer: power and magic
publisher: microsoft
available: now

"Come game time, stellar graphics—easily the best ever for any tennis game—are center court..."

words dave halverson



The Titanic didn't go this deep. I was excited at the prospect of having at a decent women's draw that included Kournikova, along with Hewitt and Sampras on the men's side, but this is crazy. You want comprehensive? Embarking on a career, after choosing either male or femal along with your DNA of choice, you take dominion over literally every aspect of your onscreen persona: head shape (detailing the upper and middle face including variations on cheeks, lips, three separate nose tools, eyes, lips...), hair, skin color, height, weight, apparel, nationality, backhand type, serve type and even your own trademark style. Next, rather than dump you into a match or exhibition (although they are available), you can opt to hit the airport in search of a corporate sponsor or any number of trainers, spending the 14 star points that will ultimately mold your career as you work your way through the ranks from 100.

Come game time, stellar graphics—easily the best ever for any tennis game—are center court, along with astutely tuned AI—staunch but never frustrating, always in league with your rank. The textures on the court and the shadows mimic real life, the models are nearly flawless, and the animation is eerily human. The crowd looks amazing too, diverse and realistic in their jubilation. Now add the kind of intuitive control tennis games live and die by (with variations on serves, volleys and power shots), and you've got a tennis game for the ages.

Between matches, you can drop by salons the world over for a new style, spend your cash filling your sports bag with new gear, or duck into your sponsor to shoot a commercial or take on a challenge. And should you prefer to go Live, you can take your show on the road via XSNsports.com and set up tours or challenge other players. My only beef with Top Spin is the inability to save mid-match, meaning if you quit, it affects your ranking...not great if you're on the last set and duty calls. The ladies play best of three so if you're pressed for time, best to make it a girl. Like I'd have it any other way.

FIFA Soccer 2004

system: ps2, xbox, gc, pc
developer: ea canada
publisher: electronic arts
available: now

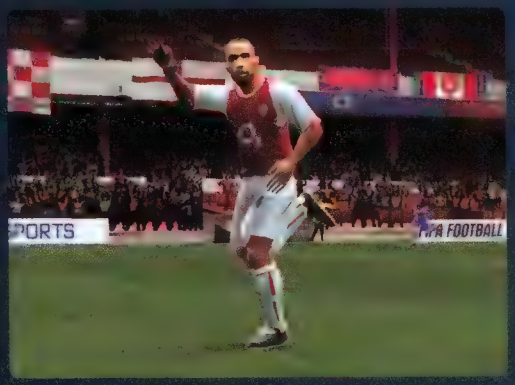
"EA Sports have pulled out all the stops and have created a soccer game that is second to none."

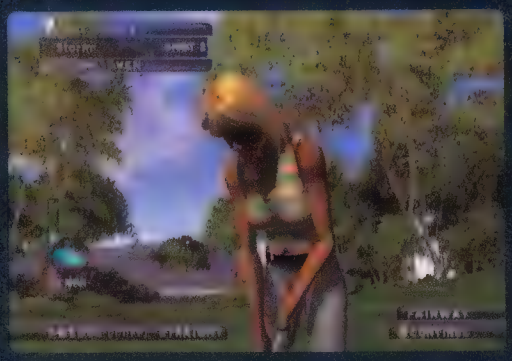
words tom ham

Not to be outdone by Winning Eleven 6, EA Sports has pulled out all the stops and created a soccer game that is second to none. New this year is the Off the Ball Control. Utilizing the right analog stick, players can now select secondary players and organize plans of attack on the fly. So if you're playing as a center halfback with the ball, with a touch of a button you can call in a winger and have him run down the field and get into position. Players can call in tackles, jostle for space and even set up long or short runs towards the goal. It may seem difficult to pull off the first time you pick up the controller, but after a few practice rounds, you'll wonder how you ever played without it.

It's quite evident that EA Sports has put a major emphasis on passing, specifically being able to pass in between players. AI teammates will do whatever it takes to get open, and opposing team members offer quite a bit of resistance. This will force players to consistently change their formations for attacks and corners. Ball physics have also been improved. I dare you to find a soccer game where the ball moves so dynamically and realistically.

A new highlight this year is Career Mode. Here, armchair coaches can manage their team, set up formations, sign/trade players and hopefully take their team to the league finals. This is a great new feature and something every soccer fan can totally get into. But to truly appreciate FIFA Soccer 2004 is to play it, and EA Sports have given players a plethora of gameplay modes, the biggest by far being online gameplay via EA Sports Nation. After competing in tournaments and league matches, players can go online via their PC and check out their up-to-the-minute standings. Combined with superb animations, excellent sound and over 15,000 players at your fingertips, FIFA Soccer 2004 is a definite winner.





Links 2004

system: xbox
developer: mgs
publisher: microsoft
available: now

"The curvature of terrain is truly exquisite, and the detail and lighting utter perfection."

words dave halverson

When it comes to video game golf, I've been pretty much card-carrying since Arnold Palmer for the Genesis and Top Player's for the Neo Geo. I can't say I fancy watching it on TV, and the only time I've spent on a course was in high school (we used to chase the ducks), but there's nothing like chillin' on a Sunday afternoon teeing off with a few friends. Well, maybe there is, but it's fun nevertheless. Since then, golf has come a long way for sure, but none so far as this in my humble opinion. I have to say, this XSN business…well, they're definitely onto something, because if Links 2004 isn't the finest golf game on the planet, I'll wear golf shoes to next year's E3. The "real time swing," using dual analog for distance, power, tempo and spin control, is as natural as I'd ever imagined it could get in translating the feel of the swing directly into the pad, and the putting, handled much the same way, has the most comprehensive aiming apparatus I've ever seen—not overly complex or twitchy, just damn good. Putts are easy to set up, leaving the hit-and-miss ratio to your technique.

New to the series is a Live component that connects you to tourneys the world over, new modes including Fast and Career Play, skill points and events to hone your player, broadcast commentary by Ken Venturi with real name recognition, an all-star pro lineup (make your own Sara, though, for maximum pleasure), new weather effects and, as I mentioned, the new spin control mechanic.

Beyond all the modes and stats, the courses are simply mind-blowing. The curvature of terrain is truly exquisite, and the detail and lighting utter perfection. The biggest surprise, however, is in the way MGS frame the action. Each game takes on a life of its own through cinematic camera placement and the most diverse set of reaction animations ever (chosen by the player). There's no doubt in my mind that professional golfers helped shape this game. Either that or there's a back nine at MGS. Best golf game ever? I certainly think so. I played Tiger Woods 2004 to compare and had to laugh.

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04	**Soul Calibur II** *namco/ xbox*
05	**Silent Hill 3** *konami / ps2*
06	**NCAA Football 2004** *ea / ps2*
07	**Soul Calibur II** *namco / ps2*
08	**Ghost Recon: IT** *ubi soft / xb*
09	**SW: Knights of the Old Republic** *lucas arts / xbox*
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	Year-to-date Hardware Market Share
01	**Game Boy Advance** *39.1%*
02	**PlayStation 2** *32%*
03	**Xbox** *13.3%*
04	**GameCube** *10.3%*
05	**PlayStation** *5.2%*
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09	**All other na**

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staff and reader selections

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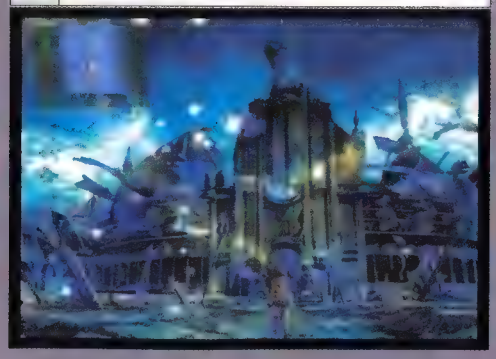
01	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
02	**Gran Turismo 4** *sony / ps2*
03	**Metal Gear Solid 3: SN** *konami / ps2*
04	**Sonic Heroes** *sega / ps2, gc, xb*
05	**Resident Evil 4** *capcom / gc*



	Dave Halverson *editor in chief*
01	**Beyond Good and Evil** *ubi soft / xbox*
02	**Voodoo Vince** *microsoft / xbox*
03	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
04	**Kya: Dark Lineage** *atari / ps2*
05	**P.N. 03** *capcom / gc*

	Brady Fiechter *executive editor*
01	**Beyond Good & Evil** *ubi soft / ps2*
02	**Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando** *sony / ps2*
03	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
04	**Castlevania: Lament of Innocence** *konami / ps2*
05	**kill.switch** *namco / xbox*

	Chris Hoffman *some editor*
01	**WWE SmackDown! HCTP** *thq / ps2*
02	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
03	**Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando** *sony / ps2*
04	**Voodoo Vince** *microsoft / xbox*
05	**Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** *konami / gba*

	Michael Hobbs *art director*
01	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
02	**Star Wars: Rebel Strike** *nintendo / gc*
03	**Kirby Air Ride** *nintendo / gc*
04	**Billy Hatcher** *sega / gc*
05	**SOCOM II beta** *sony / ps2*

	Christina Alexander *editorial assistant*
01	**Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando** *sony / ps2*
02	**Castlevania: Lament of Innocence** *konami / ps2*
03	**Jak II** *sony / ps2*
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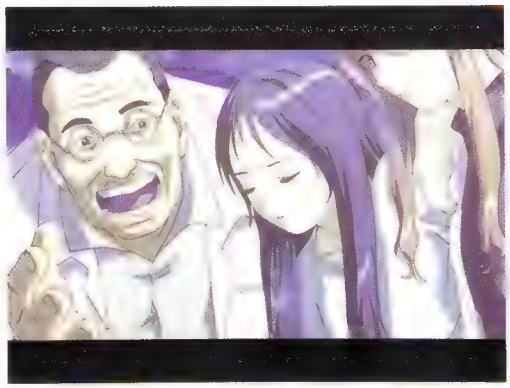
ZAiON
i wish you were here

words dave halverson

Zaion: I Wish You Were Here has got all the trappings of a *Madhouse* series: a rogue virus from space that's turning people into powerful mutants (in this case rock people or giant blobs of pink Cheez Whiz) and a top-secret organization to deal with them (or try to at least) called CURE (Committee of the Universal Resolution of Echotastrophe). Chuckle if you must; I certainly did. The CURE uses MOBs (Multi-purpose Operative Beings, better known as kids in nano-suits; see *BG Crisis 2040*) to fend off the vermin, but soldiers are dropping like flies, and without sufficient funds or reserves to meet the demand for more mutant fodder, the virus is winning.

Cut straight from the soap opera cloth prevalent in 99 percent of team-based anime, the MOBs have all the trappings of a Melrose Place reunion, including the token strong-silent rebel, Yuuji. The only thing missing is a secret weapon, and here it comes now. Will it be a big gun? A giant robot? A young, innocent girl? The horror! Enter Ai, the non-violent femme fatale heroine de jour. Provided she doesn't see any icky violent stuff in her telepathic state, Ai can psychically summon a giant CG butterfly-type thingy to magically disintegrate nasty blobs with ease. So, case closed, right? Wrong! We've got a whole series to complete, people. She's as unstable as a one-legged garden gnome as it is, but when she meets the troubled Yuuji, the plot really thickens...and the fate of the human race hangs in the balance!

While this silliness is all well and good, the problem here lies in the execution. Yes, it's *Madhouse*, but *Hellsing* this ain't—not by a long shot. *Zaion* is plagued by the worst melding of CG and traditional animation on film (no exaggeration—it's bad), predictable characters and the sorriest creature designs I think I've ever seen. The human characters are interesting enough, and the premise isn't half-bad in all of its been-there-done-that glory, but these first episodes are just so dull and predictable. There are factions within MOB and CORE to develop an intriguing story; they just need to quit jumping out of helicopters and showing us bad CG and get on with it. I'm not giving up on *Zaion* just yet, but it's certainly circling the drain. **C-**



"While this silliness is all well and good, the problem here lies in the execution."

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Your psycho or mine?

words dave halverson

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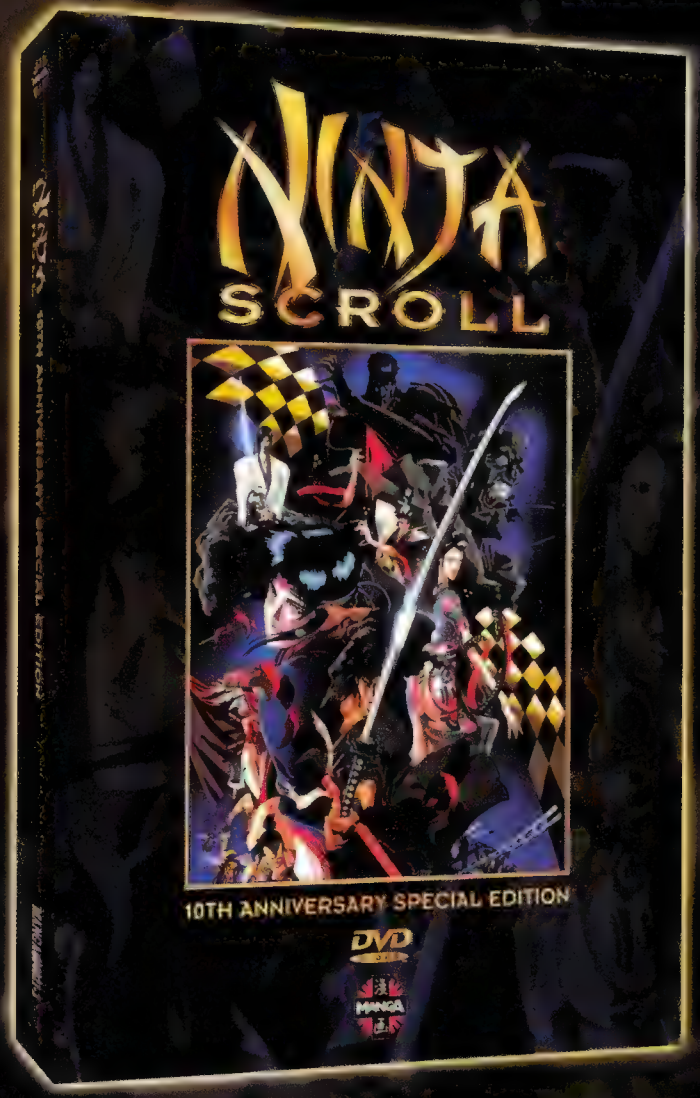

"Mixing the mystical with the fantastic, the film draws you into its universe of Freudian clans and ancient rivalries"
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Amazing, beautiful and mysterious, NINJA SCROLL blends the mysticism of 17th century Japan into an intensely packed tale of pulse pounding anime action, fantasy and adventure. Directed by revered Japanese anime veteran Yoshiaki Kawajiri (Animatrix "Program", Vampire Hunter D) and masterfully rendered by Japan's acclaimed Mad House animation studio (Perfect Blue, X, Spawn), NINJA SCROLL features a wicked cast of characters and extraordinary fight scenes combined with lightning samurai action!

One of the most critically acclaimed and highly popular anime films of all time, NINJA SCROLL has been completely digitally remastered and reformatted, utilizing the latest in Surround Sound audio technology available today for the 10th Anniversary Special Edition DVD. This exciting new double-sided/dual layered DVD offers a pristine presentation of the original 4x3 film plus a newly created 16x9 widescreen edition for home theatre enthusiasts.

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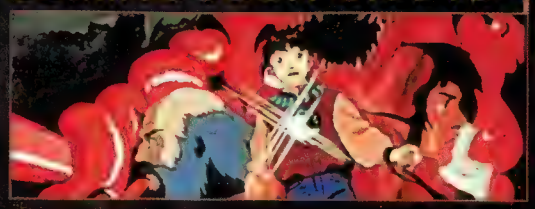

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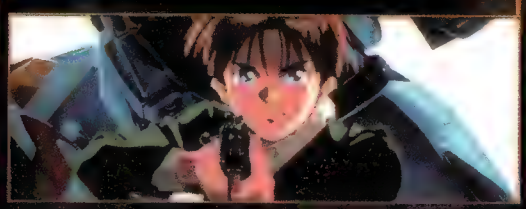

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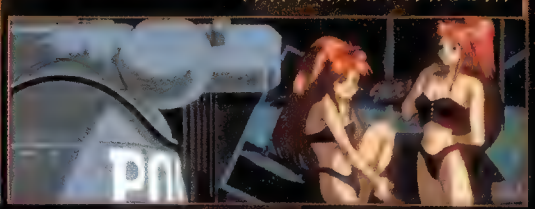

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Mazinkaiser

The doctor is most definitely in!

words dave halverson

studio adv films
rating 15 & up
running time 100 minutes
available now

Just when I thought they'd driven the giant-robo premise into the ground, in swoops none other than Go Nagai to save the day with the follow up to *Mazinger Z*, *Mazinkaiser*! Good, semi-clean, over-the-top good vs. evil hasn't been this cool since *The Big O*. Bigger and much, much bolder than life, *Mazinkaiser* is retro cool but at the same time imbued with modern technique, a veritable "Turbo Smashing Sensation!" as fluid animation, bold character design and B-movie charm converge on the screen.

Dr. Hell (and right there, you gotta love it) has resurrected an ancient army of giant robots—potentially the freshest bunch of tuna cans on record—and by way of his ultimate minion, Baron Ashura, is hot for squashing the Photon Power Lab, and with it Mazinger kind, clearing his path for—what else?—world domination...although we've not a clue why he'd want to be bothered with it. He's one of those old-school evil doers who just wants it because it's in the job description. What he didn't bargain for, however, was Mazinkaiser, a new omnipotent Mazinger robot so powerful that young Koji Kabuto (the protagonist hyper-white-bread pilot) can barely control it.

What really makes *Mazinkaiser* tick (and fly and fight and come apart and get fixed in a jiffy) is a slick script, a spot-on cornball '60s aesthetic and one of the all-time great dynamic duos in Dr. Hell and Baron Ashura. The good doctor is the quintessential ego-centric super being (mua-ha-ha generously included), and Ashura possesses the kind of unadulterated lust for dealing pain and suffering missing in so many of today's diabolical fiends. The series opener is the kind of non-stop entertainment that leaves you wanting more, rather than glad it's over, like you might have felt as a kid with a great new comic book rolled up in your pocket and nothing but time on your hands. **A-**

"...fluid animation, bold character design and B-movie charm converge on the screen."

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Blue Seed Beyond

East meets West in Neo Aragami spoogefest

words dave halverson

California's really got problems. A renegade scientist has discovered a recipe for Aragami without the requisite mojo (in Blue Seed, Susanoo powers conjure massive mutant strains known as Aragami that like to eat people) and a giant testicular monstrosity has turned the SF Bay into its own private swimming pool. Stay away from Sega, you bastard! Sounds like a perfectly relevant excuse to pull TAC (Terrestrial Administration Center) out of retirement, eh? And so, Blue Seed is born anew; please proceed to your designated retailer and just say, "Why?" I mean, do we really need more Blue Seed? I figured Aragami was about as sealed away as demon strains get. Regardless, the new threat—Neo-Aragami—is much more entertaining. My favorite moment comes by way of a toss between the U.S. military (whom of course want to blow the monster sky high) and TAC, who want to position giant ritualistic banners around SF to contain it and then slap the last one on its noggin for the grand finale. When the military resists, they exclaim, "You better let us handle this if you want to avoid publicity!" This after a 500-foot-tall pair of walking gonads has taken a bite out of the Golden Gate Bridge...oh yeah, no one noticed that. Meanwhile a new Mitama being surfaces—the sexy Valencia—to help Kusanagi fly to the rescue whenever Momiji (his human squeeze) gets in a pinch, and, well, breasts fly, love triangles blossom and family ties abound. The best part of Beyond comes after the sparks (and requisite goo) fly, by way of an entire episode dedicated to a hot spring. Make that six babes bathing in a killer hot spring. Where they take it from here is anyone's guess. C+

"This after a 500-foot-tall pair of walking gonads has taken a bite out of the Golden Gate Bridge..."

studio adv films
rating 17 & up
running time 100 minutes

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Ninja Scroll 10th Anniversary Special Edition

studio manga entertainment / **rating** 17 and up
running time 94 minutes

words dave halverson

Who isn't looking for another reason to watch *Ninja Scroll*? For one, the TV series has just started, so what a great time to catch up, and two, this *10th Anniversary Special Edition* is the shizzle, with digitally remastered 4x3 and 16x9 (fullscreen & widescreen) versions, motion menus, English and Japanese 6.1 DTS-ES and 5.1 Dolby EX Surround, character synopses, a photo gallery, director interview (Kawajiri—very nice), cast interviews and a loaded tri-fold case. Not to mention it's the reigning king of ninja anime. **A**

X TV

studio geneon entertainment / **rating** 17 and up
running time 75 minutes / **volume** 7

words dave halverson

There's not much to say about *X* the series, except that if you're not currently getting into it...get into it! "Kamui" beckons! Seeing as how the series is winding down (currently on 7 of 8), there's no better time to have at the collector's box and enjoy one of the most cerebral dramas in TV anime history. Quality-wise, few compare, and in terms of character development and story, this is the best thing since Eva when it comes to introspective, intelligent, thought-provoking science fiction. **A**

Full Metal Panic

studio adv films / **rating** 15 and up
running time 75 minutes / **volume** 4

words dave halverson

Full Metal Panic has been pretty solid since Volume 2, once it became common knowledge that Sousuke was a soldier, not a pervert. Save for the lame dating fiasco (V2, episode 8), the mix between high school hi-jinks, Kanami and Sousuke's love-hate relationship and lots of mech-bashing has been pretty even...and entertaining! The look of this show is nothing short of great for how big the series is. Nothing may ever top that crazy Behemoth chase, but they're workin' on it. Was that too inside? Yeah, it was. Sorry. **A-**

Samurai Deeper Kyo

studio anime works / **rating** 15 and up
running time 125 minutes / **volume** 2

words christina alexander

Mortal combat! This second volume of *SD Kyo* brings Demon Eyes and his entourage to Edo where a prestigious martial arts tournament is being held. Their interest piqued, Kyo, Benitora and Yukima all decide to enter and test their mettle. For Benitora, this tourney is more than just a casual show of strength. His rejection of his Tokugawa heritage has made him some powerful enemies, and to make matters worse for Beni, his first opponent is none other than Demon Eyes Kyo. This second helping of Kyo serves up a lot more plot development and downs the confusion levels (thank goodness). SDK may not be Kenshin-caliber yet, but the potential for greatness still remains. **B**

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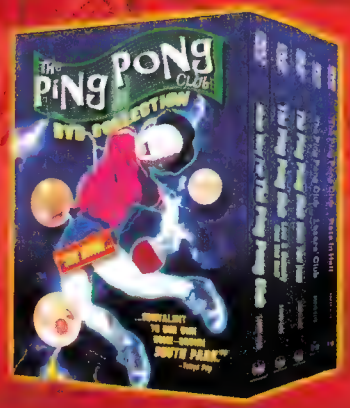

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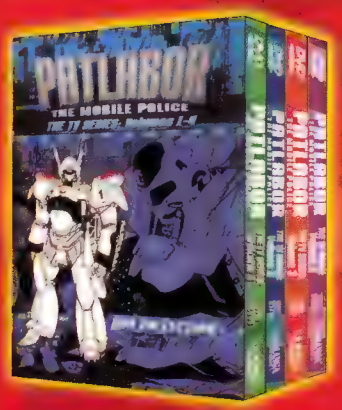

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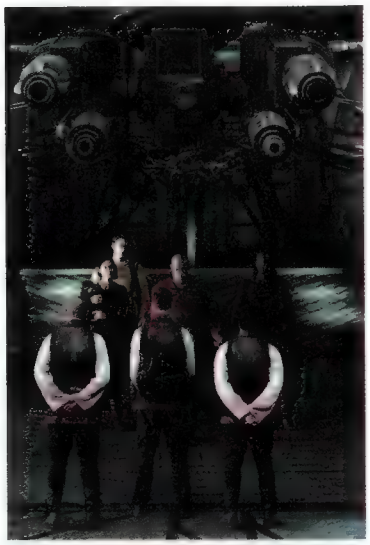
The Matrix Reloaded
Warner Bros.
R

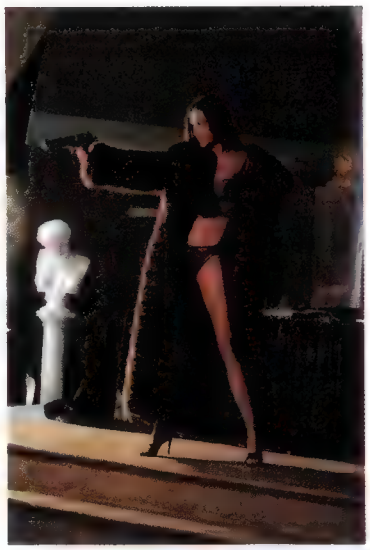


The machines are digging, the prophecy was false and Neo is merely a means to one of two ends, himself created by the machines. So then how can he love? And so the *Matrix Reloaded* ends in a grand riddle. Actually assigning a grade less than perfect to either of the *Matrix* films seems futile, if not pretentious. It would be like a teacher giving a perfect paper a B because he or she doesn't like the student. This isn't superb filmmaking; it's God-like filmmaking. Certain techniques involved may have become passé, but the way in which they're orchestrated makes them vastly superior. It's like the difference between a piece of fine animation and a cheap cartoon. The *Matrix* films are the pinnacle of action and science fiction for our time. End of story. While I find every frame of both films fascinating, there are already indelible moments stacked in my mind: Trinity's initial flight from the agents, Neo rescuing Morpheus, the awe-inspiring freeway battle and Neo's final desperate flight to catch Trinity. Soon enough it will all be over, those memories preserved on DVD. And then, imagine what they'll do next.

Extras: 120 minutes of insight into the making, marketing, and grandiose vision of *The Matrix*. For one, it depicts the daunting task of creating one of the most complex films ever made, as well as the dedication involved on the part of everyone involved. Monumental doesn't even come close; the sets, the training, the many unknowns—it's hard to believe how much of what you see onscreen is real. Absolutely miraculous. *-DH*

movie: A
extras: A

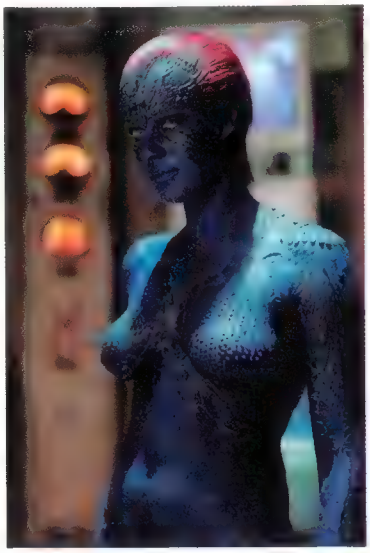
Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle
Columbia, Tristar
PG-13



Based on its box office, I suppose the question de jour is whether or not McG inadvertently clipped his Angels' wings by shaping a film around sets and props rather than a compelling story, using the cast as fodder for a live-action cartoon yanked from his own personal fantasy file. Using the Angels' facade as catalyst, McG has indeed cooked up an empty story of mass betrayal and corny coming of age, filled it with enough flash to wake the dead, dropped in three very lovely ladies (hardwired to trusses and wires for pretty much the duration) and yelled "action!" Sounds like a recipe for success to me. So what if he's single-handedly worn out slow-motion, dramatic zooms and wire work while setting a new record for edits per second and rapid cellular regeneration? It's a gas, man—an xtreme charade filled with xtreme cameos (my high school best buddy Johnny O'Mara even made the cut in McG's motocross spectacular), video game bosses and impossible feats of daring—all things I wholeheartedly dig. So what's not to love? Excess. In an effort to top his own masterpiece, McG has shellacked his cheeky cake with too much sugary icing, leaving little to fill our tummies, straining to squeeze in all of the new x-factor while saving enough room to recycle the first film's best bits of super-fun, like Cameron Diaz's butt-tacular Fed Ex recruitment video and disco dance, all those flowery flashbacks and masquerades, and even Drew's trusty cigarette lighter. He's even managed to somehow get a whip back into Lucy Lu's hands. Meanwhile, a moment of silence is in order for Bosley (who can now apparently perform acts of God when he's not acting like a fool) and the Thin Man, the second-best thing the franchise had going outside of Murray, needlessly humiliated and then sacrificed. Elsewhere, Demi Moore, who doesn't look a day over 30, plays the ridiculous fallen angel for all it's worth, and the Angels are all on their game, looking fab, kicking ass, performing countless miracles and playing it up in a vastly grittier film. Pints of blood spew from Barrymore's mouth and Diaz takes a deep shard of glass in the stomach...but not to worry, neither leaves so much as a bruise. Ain't cartoons grand?

Extras: Quite heavenly, especially McG's Telestrator commentary (watch out Madden!), which offers excellent insight into the spirit of a movie that critics shouldn't have gone anywhere near. Four behind-the-scenes featurettes go well behind the cars, babes, bikes, and fights; there's a comprehensive jukebox with insight into every track, a Pink video (yawn), a neat-o trivia track and even a cameo-graphy for those of you keeping score at home. *-DH*

movie: C+
extras: B



X-Men 2
20th Century Fox
PG-13

X-Men 2 began the summer of 2003 with a resounding "top that," and arguably no one ever did. The single most intelligent comic book movie ever made, it also stands as one of the best, period, in league with *Batman* and *Spider-Man*. The story, a fable of the prejudice prevalent in modern society interwoven with a generous helping of moral fiber, manages to be captivating on both the dramatic and action fronts, while remaining true to the source material—the ultimate conquest for such hallowed works. We finally see the origins of Wolverine (along with the mystery of his hair—check the style from scene to scene), the heart (albeit black) of Magneto, the death of Jean Grey (and thusly Phoenix rising) and the introduction of the so elegantly portrayed Nightcrawler. I didn't think Bryan Singer would ever top Mystique in the material world, but Nightcrawler is equally compelling if not more so, causing one to ponder even further the state of Wolverine, a character desperately in need of any semblance of exaggeration, left to swig beer and spew

one-liners. Given the material and direction of the film, I still don't get the matching leather outfits either, or why Storm wears a thick leather cape, but these are cracks in an otherwise flawless gem.
Extras: The Secret Origin of X-Men depicts just how precarious a beginning the X-Men had, as well as the way in which they were primed for the mass media and why it took so long as told by the master himself, Stan Lee. Make me a Striperella movie, Stan, and a game please. The pre-production bits in the making-of are equally impressive, as are the actors themselves who turn out to frame how the experience affected them personally. *-DH*
movie: B+
extras: B

Adam Sandler's Eight Crazy Nights,
Columbia Tristar
PG-13

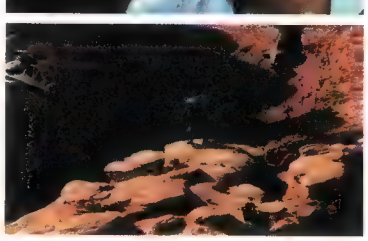
I don't see what the big deal is. I was all set to run out and see the first-ever Sandler-mation when the reviews came in branding *Eight Crazy Nights* the next *Freddy Got Fingered*. Yo, fellas, *Eight Crazy*'s protagonist, Davey Stone, has every reason to hate Christmas; so what if it manifests itself in cruelty, destruction of property and projectile vomit? He's tortured, for God's sake. Besides, this a sweet little tale of redemption, awash with expensive animation, fantastically satirized stereotypes and the usual Sandler flare for taking things just a wee bit over the line. In other words, it's a feel-good hoot 'n' a half! His films always come clean in the end, so give the guy a break. Of course, this comes from someone who loved (not liked, loved) *Little Nicky*, so be warned. I know one thing: *Eight Crazy Nights* will be playing 'round the clock at my house come the holidays, joining the likes of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. This, while we enjoy heavy metal remixes of Bing Crosby tunes and plot ways to de-beard department store Santas! I'll be sure and throw another kitten on the fire for all the critics that kept me from seeing this in the theaters.
Extras: All you need is "A day with the Meatball," Adam's English bulldog (and star of the silver screen) doing his thing in his own short film. But there's more! Nine, count 'em, nine featurettes (all fascinating), deleted scenes with commentary, an HBO First Look special, and the infamous "Chanukah Song Part 3" music video. Now quit reading and go buy me a present! *-DH*
movie: B
extras: B+

A Mighty Wind
Warner Home Video
PG-13

While it doesn't quite maintain the insane, eccentric comic pitch of his tear-inducing *Best in Show* and *Waiting for Guffman*, Christopher Guest's most recent mockumentary is a sweet, sassy spoof of the '60s folk music scene. His usual cast of quirky suspects return to improvise their way through sharply written dialogue that may hinge on a little mockery but is never less than warmly humorous. *A Mighty Wind*'s only real weakness is that the folk music scene isn't as readily parodied as Guest's previous efforts, but he makes up for the deficiencies with characters who are absurdly funny in any context. As they work toward reunion shows, writing newly inspired tunes and trying to recapture the magic once contained only in their offcenter world, the showmen of *A Mighty Wind* inspire laughs by their sublimely goofy situations and sincere mannerisms alone before even speaking a funny word. Extras: Deleted scenes are always a source for good laughs, but I wanted so much more and probably could have easily gotten it considering Guest's reliance on shooting hours of footage. Text/image galleries are never worth much, but the fun audio commentary by director Guest and cowriter/actor Eugene Levy is an obvious but great addition. *-BF*
movie: B
extras: B-

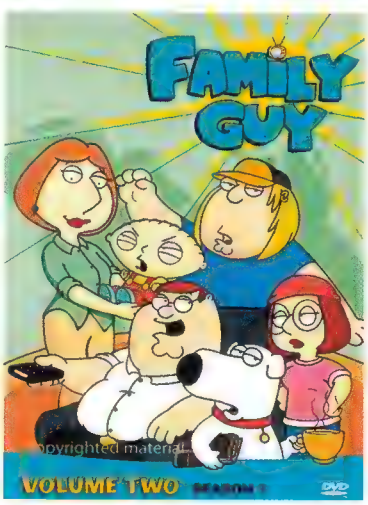
Hulk
Universal Home Video
PG-13

Hulk is not your typical comic-book thriller, mining for more soul than predictable action, more spirit than flashy adventure. The movie was directed by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* director Ang Lee, who calls on his artistic, earnest strokes of passionate filmmaking to elevate the big green monster from the pages of the comic book to the radically different dynamic of film. Gorgeously shot and cleverly edited to capture the feel of the inked page, *The Hulk* captures you with its look, surviving the film's more languid moments. The occasional action scene is always welcome—the battle with the hounds is awesome—but is certainly not the release the film is searching for. The material Lee's shooting just isn't very exciting, laden with melodrama and heavy-handed pacing. All the characters roil with tragedy and trauma, joining the Hulk in the darkness of transformation, becoming, ironically, too comical. The movie wants to be much more than it ultimately becomes, falling apart in the final showdown that leaves too much unsolved. Lee's direction of the action is admirable, showing a mastery of using CG as physical dimension within the world. For all his strengths, the Hulk gets worn down by the weight of his plodding world.



Extras: It's a little late to care about the playable demo of the Hulk video game, so enjoy instead the telling audio commentary, five entertaining featurettes, deleted scenes and a few other goodies loaded onto the second disc. Animation shorts are very cool. *-BF*
movie: C+
extras: B+

Family Guy: Third Season
20th Century Fox Home Video
not rated



I never watched the on-again, off-again, TV censor-cringing *Family Guy* when it ran on Fox, but its subversive, mean-spirited brand of satire has made me a fan now that it's reached the third season on DVD. The show has gotten progressively more absurd, becoming even more esoteric and self-indulgent in its spiteful humor, which is just fine by me. Everyone's a target, from religion to gays to handicaps to everyone in between capable of receiving a cheap and just clever-enough shot. The show entertains in spurts, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes failing miserably, but the laughs do exist in a league of their own. You don't give a whit for the dysfunctional characters of the Griffin Family, but the situations they inspire keep the flavor sharp.
Extras: Writer and voice-actor commentary not so funny; these people don't seem too thrilled to be here. The added episode that was never aired is also included. *-BF*

series: B
extras: D+

Rock Star Gamers: Less Than Jake

words lucas mast

The music industry can be a fickle business. People's tastes seem to change as often as there is a new reality television show, and to be around more than a few albums and still be able to have a solid fan base is truly an accomplishment. As veterans of the So Cal rock scene, Less Than Jake (LTJ) have persevered and have been able to watch their fans grow from young skaters and impressionable youth to older skaters and productive members of society. Never mind that the guys of Less Than Jake have been the same since they dropped their unique brand of horn-influenced rock on *Pezcore* in 1995. Probably best known to causal listeners for their inventive covers (NWA's "Dopeman" ranks right up there), LTJ dropped the album *Anthem* (Warner Brothers) to critical success earlier this summer. In between the European leg of their tour and leaving to play for the good people of Australia, New Zealand and Japan, drummer and lyricist Vinnie took the time to chat with Play about touring, technology, toys and toothbrushes.

In a musical world where "stars" are a dime a dozen and longevity means more than one album, Less Than Jake has set a pace that few others will be able to follow. To their legions of fans, their story is familiar: a raw but identifiable sound that began more than 10 years ago in Gainesville, Florida. Dozens of albums and EPs later, LTJ is still in the thick of the musical scene they helped to pioneer, coming off another successful stint on the groundbreaking Vans Warped Tour as well as playing several major festivals in Europe. "Between seeing friends like Reel Big Fish and meeting groups like Massive Attack, the European festivals were an incredible experience—a very open-minded approach to music that juxtaposes punk and techno music in the same venue," observes Vinnie.

Moving from music momentarily to touch on the nexus between music and art, one needs only look to their most recent album, *Anthem*, to see that both the band and their fans expect more than simply putting out another album. "We pour ourselves into our work, and try to do something different with the packaging of each album. *On Borders and Boundaries*, we included an old-school trip odometer on the back of the album featuring some of our favorite touring cities. On *Anthem*, we provided the lyrics and titles of the tracks to artists to create graphical representation of our musical works." And not just any artists—Obey Giant creator Shepherd Fairey and underground favorite David Cho among others.

It would not be a conversation with **play** without inquiring as to the gaming preferences of LTJ. "Ever since the early days of hitting the road to tour, games have been a great way to pass the time between cities. I can remember playing hours of Mario Kart and James Bond. Now it seems like the guys are into more of the sports games—Madden, hockey, and even some Tony Hawk skateboarding seem to be the favorites lately." The members of LTJ seem like the type of guys who might take their gaming endeavors seriously, engaging in a little tour bus roughhousing should they start to fall behind by a goal or a touchdown.

Mentioning that I had participated alongside the aforementioned Tony Hawk in this year's running of the Gumball 3000 rally, Vinnie starts to discuss the "fanboy" reaction that even he is subject to—even after becoming a household name to many of their diehard fans. "I think the concept of being known to others and recognized by people has been a longer, more drawn out process for us. We have been around for a while and have taken things one step at a time, building and evolving both our musical style and our relationship with our fans. Guys we know in other bands have gotten a lucky break, had a song on the radio and then all of a sudden go from playing for 200 people to 10,000 people and crack under the pressure." Further commenting on the perils of success as well as the inability to predict people's changing tastes, he offers that "Marcy Playground (of "Sex and Candy" fame) were on the same label that we were at the time. They had sold a million records, but on a consistent basis we were still outdrawing them at shows. And while I am not picking on her in particular, someone like Avril Lavigne will probably be a musical footnote in a few years time. Very few people in the music business have the ability to have true staying power—Radiohead, Madonna, and Coldplay are ones who immediately come to mind that seem to get it and will probably continue to enjoy success."

> "...someone like Avril Lavigne will probably be a musical footnote in a few years time."

When you think of punk and ska, the DIY mentality seems to be one of the first things that come to mind. But don't let the raw energy of the music fool you into thinking that LTJ are a band of technological backwoodsmen. Quite the contrary, as indicated by Vinnie's must-haves while on the road: his Apple iPod, a laptop, a Lomo camera, a digital camera, a PDA phone—and a toothbrush. "We have worked quite a bit with Apple to try and give people options for getting music. On one side, file sharing has given great exposure to bands and will enable a kid in Iowa who has never hear of us to check us out. But the label owner in me who is trying to break bands will go broke in the process if people are not buying music." In the future, Vinnie imagines kiosks where you can plug in your iPod or other musical device to download the latest tracks quickly and for a reasonable price. But before you throw away your vinyl and CDs in a rush to get to the musical gas-station of the future, it is important to note that Vinnie, punk music's version of the Renaissance man, also owns a side label that produces collectible vinyl records. "Nostrano has proven that people see vinyl as a ritual—something that is warm and tangible—not cold and digital." The band plans on releasing the singles from Anthem as collectible 7" soon.

Realizing early on that merchandising was a way to make some money and also give something cool back to the fans, Vinnie and the other guys from Less Than Jake have always been on their toes to come up with cool and novel ways to keep people interested. Recognizing the link between art and music, especially on a global level, has also reassured them they are on the right track with their thinking. "The last time I was in Japan I was walking down the street and saw an Obey Giant store—just like Tokion or A Bathing Ape or something. It seems only a matter of time before the people making art/fashion/clothing will come around and try making music as well." But even in the early days when money was tight, LTJ did all they could to be unique and fuse art and music. "We took a lot of pride in what we have done, from making music to hand screening 7", creating glowing and laser-etched items, and even the bobble-head dolls (1000 of them sold out in 5 hours at $40 a pop)." Vinnie is even launching a limited-edition t-shirt and toy company called Monkeys versus Robots. "I am always making lists of things I want to do—and now I am getting a chance to do some of them."

Suffice it to say, with the experiences they have learned from in the past, and a keen eye to the future, LTJ will be around for a while to come.

Band Website: www.lessthanjake.com
Fueled By Ramen label site: www.fueledbyramen.com

music reviews

Various Artists
Party Monster--Original Soundtrack
(TVT)

Featuring some of the best rock, electroclash, classic electronica and dance music spanning the past few decades, the album takes listeners on a retrospective tour that encompasses the era that was Michael Alig, king of the club kids turned killer. From Marilyn Manson to Keoki, to Ladytron to Felix da Housecat, Party Monster rocks you on a number of levels. Listening to the soundtrack is like being transported into the wild and crazy times portrayed so vividly in the movie the soundtrack supports. -LM

Babu
Duck Season 2 (Sequence)

As chief DJ for the Dilated Peoples and member of the World Famous Beat Junkies, Babu may be one of the hardest-working people in show biz. On this followup to his first *Duck Season* effort, Babu assembles an impressive lineup including Talib Kweli, KRS One, Gang Starr, Rakaa and Evidence of Dilated Peoples and Jaylib to cook up a stew sure to feed the masses. -*LM*

Basement Jaxx
Kish Kash (Astralwerks/XL)

Following on the wild success of their last two albums (*Rooty* and *Remedy*), England's rocking duo enlist some top talent to ensure success of *Kish Kash*. From soulstress Meshell N'Degeocello to recent Mercury Prize winner Dizzee Rascal to former 'NSYNC start JC Chasez the artists make for interesting partnerships with their trademark up-tempo beats. Fans will love the album, which is sure to convert many new people into followers of the Jaxx. -*LM*

PS2 USB headset

Logitech Premium USB Headset 300

www.logitech.com
$49

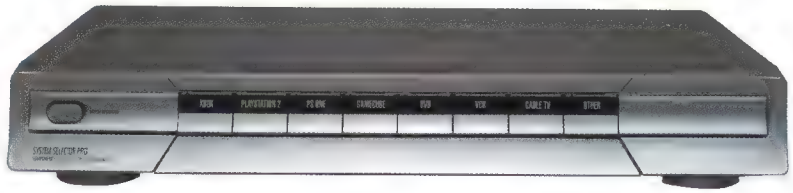
So you think you're ready for some online gameplay? Feel like trash-talking your buddies? Before heading online, be sure you're well-equipped with the right headset and microphone. My pick—the Logitech Premium USB Headset 300. Being digital USB, it can be used either on your PS2 or PC. The frequency response and sound quality are top notch. A major plus for PC gamers is the inline volume control module. With it, you can quickly adjust volume controls without having to exit to Windows. What's brilliant about the USB Headset 300 is that no drivers need to be installed—just plug it in and you're good to go. Compared to the similarly priced Plantronics headset, the noise-canceling microphone of the USB Headset 300 was far superior. Even though they're a bit pricey, you won't find a better headset for your gaming needs.

component switcher

Pelican System Selector Pro

www.pelicanperformance.com
$99

With the state of console gaming today, where two of the top three platforms are tethered to hard drives, powered system selectors such as Pelican's System Selector Pro have become a prerequisite of the modern gaming set-up. Problem is, or was until now, that you couldn't touch one for under 300 bucks. The SSP has all the functionality of the more expensive players—component, S-video, AV, optical, and ethernet outputs for up to eight peripherals denoted by LED illuminated buttons (finally!) for your PS2, GameCube, Xbox, computer, DVD, VCR, cable TV and one auxiliary—but you won't pay 300 dollars, or even 200... No, it's yours for just $99.99. All Pelican asks is that you tell one friend. *-DH*



fancy cell phone

T-Mobile Sidekick

www.tmobile.com
$299

If you're looking for an all-in-one communication device, T-Mobile's second-generation Sidekick might be for you. The original Sidekick was released earlier this year and featured a black and white screen. This unit boasts a 240x160 pixel, TFT transflective display that supports 65,000 colors. Other key features include full Web Browsing, text messaging, AOL Instant Messenger and AOL email. You can also set up two other POP3 email accounts. The device even supports images, attachments and PDF files. The Sidekick can also serve as your cell phone, but in all honesty, the phone implementation could've been a lot better. Dialing numbers is an exercise in tedium and a speakerphone would've been nice. My favorite feature is the keyboard. Within no time, I was able to type out URLs, full emails and Instant Messages (even with my big fingers). Although the Sidekick comes with calendar and contact list functionality, you can't sync it up with your desktop. In order to sync it, you have to transfer your information to a T-Mobile-sponsored site and then your Sidekick will automatically update your device. Although the software suite is somewhat limited, T-Mobile promises more applications and upgrades for the Sidekick by the end of the year.

Toycom: Fight!

From the Capcom Figure Collection: Capcom Mini PC round 1 (Toycom) features 3 iterations of both Cammy and Chun Li—arguably SF's most shapely duo—weighing in at 4" tall, pre-assembled with articulate paint application, mega-detail and sealed on blister cards. www.toycom.net

Grab your stick!

All I want for Christmas...is old video games! From Jakks Pacific, these crazy cool little joy sticks plug directly into the AV inputs on your TV, for some old-school arcade skills. The Namco version (shaped like a mini coin-op) features Bosconian, Dig Dug, Galaxian, Rally X and Pac-Man, while the Atari version spits out 10 games that'll make you kiss your console: Gravitar, Asteroids, Centipede, Breakout, Missile Command, Pong, Yars Revenge, Circus Atari, Adventure, and Real Sports Volleyball. What no 5200 games? Get on it! Buck Rogers and Gyruss beckon! I'm going with Namco on this one; gotta' dig Dig Dug. www.jakkspacific.com

Maximo!

Just in time for Army of Zin, Toycom's new Maximo line arrives this December featuring Maximo, Queen Sophia, Evil King Achilles, Zombie, Captain Cadaver and Lord Glutterscom all standing a mighty 6" tall, fully painted with 6 points of articulation, and accessories. Don't leave the kingdom without them.

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